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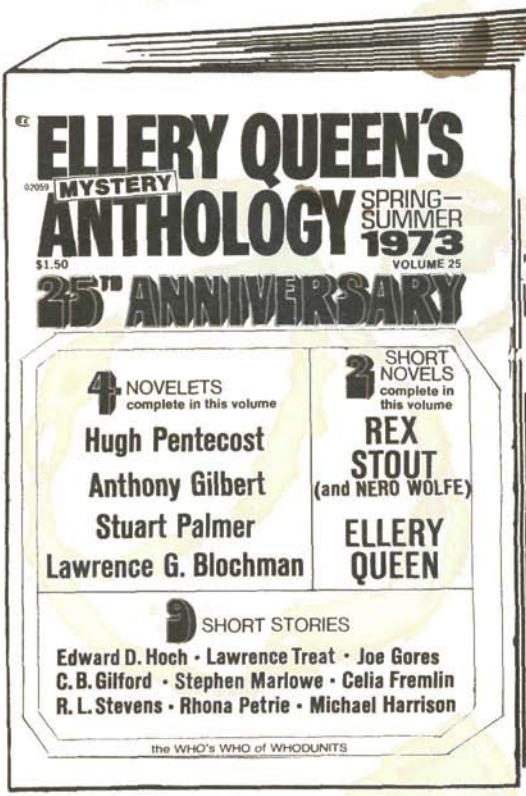

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Mystery Magazine

THE OBVIOUS FACTOR	Isaac Asimov	6
MR. JOSLIN'S JOURNEY	Mary Hocking	21
OVER THE BORDERLINE	Jeff Sweet	30
THE ADVENTURE OF THE HANSOM RANSOM	Robert L. Fish	35
MURDER OF A MALE CHAUVINIST	Francis M. Nevins, Jr.	44
THE INELEGANT CONSPIRACY	Miriam Allen deFord	51
DR. COFFEE AND THE OTHER TWIN	Lawrence G. Blochman	62
THE PHOTOGRAPHER AND THE ARTIST	James Holding	96
CRIME AT THE COMICONVENTION	Mike W. Barr	106
THE COUNTRY OF SILENCE	Gerald Weales	118
THE BUTLER DID IT	H. R. F. Keating	125
NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH	Patricia McGerr	131
THE THEFT OF THE CIRCUS POSTER	Edward D. Hoch	145
THE JURY BOX	John Dickson Carr	116

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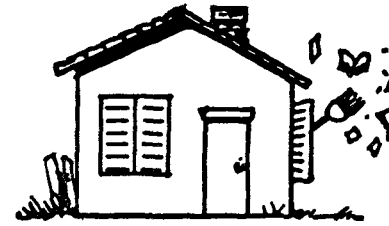

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THE OBVIOUS FACTOR

by ISAAC ASIMOV

Thomas Trumbull, the code expert, looked around the table and said, with some satisfaction, "Well, at least you won't get yourself pen-and-inked into oblivion, Voss. Our resident artist isn't here. —*Henry!*"

Henry was at Trumbull's elbow before the echo of the bellow had died, with no sign of perturbation on his bright-eyed and unlined face. Trumbull took the Scotch and soda the waiter had on his tray and said, "Has Mario called, Henry?"

"No, sir," said Henry calmly.

Geoffrey Avalon, the patent attorney, had reduced his second drink to the halfway point and was swirling it absently. "After last month's tale about his murdered sister, it could be that he didn't want to—"

He did not complete the sentence, but put down his glass carefully in front of the seat he intended to take. The monthly banquet of the Black Widowers was about to begin.

Trumbull, who was host, took the armchair at the head

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of the table and said, "Have you got them all straight, Voss? At my left is James Drake. He's a chemist, but he knows much more about pulp fiction than about chemistry. Then Geoffrey Avalon, a lawyer who never sees the inside of a courtroom; Emmanuel Rubin, who writes fiction in between talking, which is practically never; and Roger Halsted—Roger, you're not inflicting another limerick on us this session, are you?"

"A limerick?" said Trumbull's guest, speaking for the first time. His voice was pleasant, light and yet rich, with all consonants carefully pronounced. He had a white beard, evenly cut from temple to temple, and white hair. His youthful face shone pinkly within its white fence. "A poet, too?"

"Poet?" snorted Trumbull. "Not even a mathematician, which is what he claims to be. He insists on writing a limerick for every book of the *Iliad.*"

"And the *Odyssey*," said Halsted, in his soft, unhurried voice. "But, yes, I have my limerick."

"Good! It's out of order," said Trumbull, "You are not to read it. I claim host's privilege."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," said Avalon, the flat lines of his well-preserved face set in disappointment. "Let him recite the poor thing. It takes thirty seconds and I find it fun."

Trumbull pretended not to hear. "You've all got it straight about my guest now. He's Dr. Voss Eldridge. He's a Ph.D. So is Drake, Voss. We're all doctors, though, by virtue of membership in the Black Widowers." He then raised his glass, gave the monthly invocation to Old King Cole, and the meal was officially begun.

Halsted, who had been whispering to Drake, passed a paper to him. Drake rose and declaimed:

"Next a Lycian attempted
  a ruse
"With an arrow—per-
  mitted by Zeus.
"Who will trust Trojan
  candor, as
"This sly deed of Pan-
  darus
"Puts an end to the scarce-
  proclaimed truce."

"Damn it," said Trumbull. "I ruled against reading it!"

"Against *my* reading it," said Halsted. "Drake read it."

"It's disappointing not to have Mario here," said Avalon. "He would ask what it means."

"Go ahead, Jeff," said Rubin. "I'll pretend I don't understand it and you explain it to us."

But Avalon maintained a dignified silence while Henry served the appetizer and Rubin

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fixed it with his usual suspicious stare.

"I hate stuff," he said, "that's so chopped up and drowned in goop that you can't see what the ingredients are."

Henry said, "I think you'll find it quite wholesome."

"And you know Henry's honesty," said Drake. "It wouldn't hurt a fly if he says it's wholesome."

"Try it; you'll like it," said Avalon.

Rubin tried it but his face showed no signs of liking it. It was noted later, however, that he had finished it.

Dr. Eldridge said, "Is there a necessity of explaining these limericks, Dr. Avalon? Are there tricks to them?"

"No, not at all, and don't bother with the doctorate. That's only for formal occasions, though it's good of you to humor one of the club's idiosyncracies. It's just that Mario has never read the *Iliad;* few have, these days."

"Pandarus, as I recall, was a go-between and gives us the word 'pander.' That, I take it, was the sly deed referred to in the limerick."

"Oh, no, no," said Avalon, unsuccessfully hiding his delight. "You're thinking now of the medieval Troilus-tale, which Shakespeare drew on for his *Troilus and Cressida.* Pandarus was the go-between in that. In the *Iliad* he was merely a Lycian archer who shot at Menelaus during a truce. That was the sly deed. —He is killed in the next book by the Greek warrior, Diomedes."

"Ah," said Eldridge, smiling faintly, "it's easy to be fooled, isn't it?"

"If you want to be," said Rubin, smiling as the London broil arrived. There was no mistaking the nature of its components. He buttered a roll and ate it as though to give himself time to contemplate the beauty of the meat.

"As a matter of fact," said Halsted, "we've solved quite a few puzzles in recent meetings. We did rather well."

"We did poorly," said Trumbull. "Henry is the one who did well."

"I *include* Henry when I say 'we'," said Halsted, his fair face flushing.

"Henry?" asked Eldridge.

"Our esteemed waiter," said Trumbull, "and honorary member of the Black Widowers."

Henry, who was filling the water glasses, said, "You honor me, sir."

"Honor, hell. I wouldn't come to any meeting if you weren't taking care of the table, Henry."

"It's good of you to say so, sir."

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Eldridge remained thoughtfully quiet thereafter, as he followed the tide of conversation that, as was usual, grew steadily in intensity. Drake was making some obscure distinction between Secret Agent X and Operator 5, and Rubin, for some reason known only to himself, was disputing the point.

Drake, whose slightly hoarse voice never rose, said, "Operator 5 may have used disguises. I won't deny that. It was Secret Agent X, however, who was 'the man of a thousand faces.' I can send you a Xerox of the contents page of a magazine from my library to prove it." He made a note to himself in his memo book.

Rubin, scenting defeat, shifted ground. "There's no such thing as a disguise, anyway. There are a thousand things no one can disguise—idiosyncracies of stance, walk, voice; a thousand habits you can't change because you don't even know you have them. A disguise works only because no one *looks*."

"People fool themselves, in other words," said Eldridge.

"Absolutely," said Rubin. "People *want* to be fooled."

The ice-cream parfait was brought in, and not long after that Trumbull struck his water glass with his spoon.

"Inquisition time," he said. "As Grand Inquisitor I pass, since I'm the host. Manny, will you do the honors?"

Rubin said at once, "Dr. Eldridge, how do you justify the fact of your existence?"

"By the fact that I labor to distinguish truth from folly."

"Do you consider that you succeed in doing so?"

"Not as often as I wish, perhaps. And yet as often as most. To distinguish truth from folly is a common desire; we all try our hands at it. My interpretation of Pandarus' deed in Halsted's limerick was folly and Avalon corrected me. The common notion of disguise—you claimed that to be folly and you corrected it. When I find folly, I try to correct it, if I can."

"What is your form of folly correction, Eldridge? How would you describe your profession?"

"I am," said Eldridge, "Associate Professor of Abnormal Psychology."

"Where do you—" began Rubin.

Avalon interrupted, his deep voice dominating, "Sorry, Manny, but I smell an evasion. You asked Dr. Eldridge's profession and he gave you a title. —What do you do, Dr. Eldridge, to occupy your time most significantly?"

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"I investigate parapsychological phenomena," said Eldridge.

"Oh, God," muttered Drake, and stubbed out his cigarette.

Eldridge said, "You disapprove of that, sir?" There was no sign of annoyance on his face. He turned to Henry and said, "No, thank you, Henry, I've had enough coffee."

Henry passed on to Rubin, who was holding his cup in the air as a signal of its emptiness.

"It's not a question of approval or disapproval," said Drake. "I simply think you're wasting your time."

"In what way?"

"You investigate telepathy, precognition, things like that?"

"Yes. And ghosts and spiritual phenomena, too."

"All right. Have you ever come across something you could *not* explain?"

"Explain in what way? I could explain a ghost by simply saying, 'Yes, that's a ghost.' I take it that's not what you mean."

Rubin broke in. "I hate to be on Drake's side right now, but he means to ask whether or not you have ever come across a phenomenon you could not explain by the accepted and prosaic laws of science."

"I have come across many such phenomena."

"That you could not explain?" asked Halsted.

"That I could not explain. Not a month passes that something doesn't cross my desk which I cannot explain," said Eldridge, nodding his head gently.

There was a short silence of palpable disagreement and then Avalon said, "Does that mean you believe in these psychic phenomena?"

"If you mean, do I think events take place that violate the laws of physics, no. Do I think, however, that I know all there is to know about the laws of physics? Also, no. Do I think *anyone* knows all there is to know about the laws of physics? No, a third time."

"That's evasion," said Drake. "Do you have any evidence, for example, that telepathy exists, and that the laws of physics, as presently accepted, will have to be modified accordingly?"

"I am not ready to commit myself that far. I well know that in even the most circumstantial stories there are honest mistakes, exaggerations, misinterpretations, outright hoaxes. And yet, even allowing for all that, I have come across incidents I cannot bring myself to dismiss."

Eldridge shook his head and continued, "It's not easy, this job of mine. There are some incidents for which no con-

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ceivable run-of-the-mill explanation seems possible; where the evidence for something quite apart from the known rules by which the Universe seems to run appears irrefutable. It would seem I *must* accept—and yet I hesitate. Can I labor under a hoax so cleverly manipulated, or an error so cleverly hidden, that I take for the gold of fact what is only the brass of nonsense? I can be fooled, as Rubin would point out."

Trumbull said, "Manny would say that you *want* to be fooled."

"Maybe I do. We all want dramatic things to be true. We want to be able to wish on a star, to have strange powers, to be irresistible to women—and would inwardly conspire to believe such things no matter how much we might lay claim to complete rationality."

"Not me," said Rubin flatly. "I've never kidded myself in my life."

"No?" Eldridge looked at him thoughtfully. "I take it then that you refuse to believe in the actual existence of parapsychological phenomena under all circumstances?"

"I wouldn't say that," said Rubin, "but I'd need damned good evidence—better evidence than I've ever seen advanced."

"And how about the rest of you gentlemen?"

Drake said, "We're all rationalists."

"You, too, Tom?"

Trumbull's lined face broke into a grim smile. "You've never convinced me with any of your tales before this, Voss. I don't think you can convince me now."

"I never told you tales that convinced *me*, Tom. —But I have one now, something I've never told you and that no one really knows about outside my department. I can tell it to you all and if you can come up with an explanation that would require no change in the fundamental scientific view of the Universe, I would be greatly relieved."

"A ghost story?" said Halsted.

"No, not a ghost story," said Eldridge. "It is merely a story that defies the principle of cause and effect, the very foundation stone on which all science is built. To put it another way, it defies the concept of the irreversible forward flow of time."

"Actually," said Rubin, "it's quite possible, on the subatomic level, to consider time as flowing either—"

"Please, Manny," said Trumbull, "let Voss talk."

Henry had quietly placed the brandy before each of the diners. Eldridge lifted his small

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glass absently and sniffed at it, then nodded to Henry, who returned a small urbane smile.

"It's an odd thing," said Eldridge, "but so many of those who claim to have strange powers, or have it claimed for them, are young women of no particular education, no particular presence, no particular intelligence. It is as though the existence of a special talent has consumed all the more usual facets of personality. Maybe it's just more noticeable in women.

"At any rate, I am speaking of someone I'll just call Miriam for now. You understand I'm not using her real name. The woman is still under investigation and it would be disastrous, from my point of view, to get any kind of publicity hounds on her track. You understand?"

Trumbull frowned severely. "Come on, Voss, you know I assured you that nothing said here is ever repeated outside the confines of these walls. You needn't feel constrained."

"Accidents do happen," said Eldridge equably. "At any rate, Miriam never completed grade school and earns her living as a salesgirl at a five-and-ten. She is not attractive and no one will sweep her away from the counter, which may be a good thing—she is useful there and serves the customers well. You might not think so, since she cannot add correctly and is subject to incapacitating headaches during which she will sit in a back room and upset the other employees by muttering gibberish to herself. Nevertheless, the store wouldn't dream of letting her go."

"Why not?" asked Rubin, clearly steeling himself to skepticism at every point.

"Because she spots shoplifters who, as you know, can bleed a store to death these days through a thousand small cuts. It isn't that Miriam is in any way shrewd or keen-eyed or unrelenting in pursuit. She just knows a shoplifter when he or she enters the store, even if Miriam has never seen the person before, and even if she doesn't actually see the person come in.

"At first she followed them herself for brief intervals, then grew hysterical and began her muttering. The manager eventually tied the two things together—Miriam's characteristic behavior and the shoplifting. He started to watch for one, then the other, and it didn't take long for him to find out that she never missed.

"Losses quickly dropped to virtually nothing in that particular five-and-ten despite the fact that the store is in a bad neighborhood. The manager, of course, received all the credit.

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He probably deliberately kept the truth from becoming known to prevent anyone trying to steal Miriam away.

"But then I think he began to grow afraid of it. Miriam fingered a shoplifter who later was mixed up in a shooting incident. He had read about some of the work my department does, so he came to us. Eventually he brought Miriam to us.

"We got her to come to the college regularly. We paid her, of course. Not much, but then she didn't ask for much. She was an unpleasant, not-bright girl of about twenty, who was reluctant to talk and describe what went on in her mind. I suppose she had spent a childhood having her queer notions beaten out of her and had learned to be cautious."

Drake said, "You're telling us she had a gift for precognition?"

Eldridge said, "Since precognition is just Latin for seeing-things-before-they-happen, and since she sees things before they happen, how else can I describe it? She sees unpleasant things only, things that upset or frighten her, which, I imagine, makes her life a hell. It is the quality of becoming upset or frightened that breaks down the time barrier."

Halsted said, "Let's set some boundaries. How far ahead in time does she see things? How far away in space?"

"We could never get her to do much for us," said Eldridge. "Her talent wasn't on tap at will and with us she never relaxed. From what the manager told us and from what we could pick up, it seemed she could never detect anything more than a short time ahead—half an hour to an hour at the most."

Rubin snorted.

"A few minutes," said Eldridge mildly, "is as good as a century. The principle stands. Cause-and-effect is violated and the flow of time is reversed.

"But in space there seemed no limits. As she described it, when I could get her to say anything at all, and as I interpreted her rather clumsy and incoherent words, the background of her mind is a constant flickering of frightening shapes. Every once in a while this is lit up, as though by a momentary lightning flash, and she sees, or becomes aware. She sees most clearly what is close by or what she is most concerned about—the shoplifting, for instance. Occasionally, though, she sees what must be taking place farther away. The greater the disaster, the farther she can sense things. I suspect she could

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detect a nuclear bomb getting ready to explode anywhere in the world."

Rubin said, "I imagine she speaks incoherently and you fill in the rest. History is full of ecstatic prophets whose mumbles are interpreted as wisdom."

"I agree," said Eldridge, "and I pay no attention—at least, not much—to anything that isn't clear. I don't even attach importance to her feats with shoplifters. She might be sensitive enough to detect some characteristic way in which shoplifters look and stand, some aura, some smell—the sort of thing you talked about, Rubin, as things no one can disguise. But then—"

"Then?" prompted Halsted.

"Just a minute," said Eldridge. "Henry, could I have a refill in my coffee cup after all?"

"Certainly," said Henry.

Eldridge watched the coffee level rise. "What's *your* attitude on psychic phenomena, Henry?"

Henry said, "I have no general attitude, sir. I accept whatever it seems to me I must accept."

"Good!" said Eldridge. "I'll rely on you and not on these prejudiced and preconcepted rationalists here."

"Go on, then," said Drake. "You paused at the dramatic moment to throw us off."

"No," said Eldridge. "I was saying that I did not take Miriam seriously until one day she suddenly began to squirm and pant and mumble under her breath. She does that now and then, but this time she kept muttering, 'Eldridge, Eldridge,' and the word grew shriller and shriller.

"I assumed she was calling me, but she wasn't. When I responded she ignored me. Over and over again it was 'Eldridge, Eldridge!' Then she began to scream, 'Fire! Oh, Lord! It's burning! Help! Eldridge! Eldridge!' Over and over again, with all kinds of variations. She kept it up for half an hour.

"We tried to make some sense out of it. We spoke quietly, of course, because we didn't want to intrude more than we had to, but we kept saying, 'Where? Where?' Incoherently enough, and in scraps, she told us enough to make us guess it was San Francisco which, I need not tell you, is three thousand miles away. There's only one Golden Gate Bridge after all, and in one spasm she gasped out, 'Golden Gate,' over and over. Afterward it turned out she had never heard of the Golden Gate Bridge and was quite shaky even as to the location of San Francisco.

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"When we put it all together we decided that there was an old apartment house somewhere in San Francisco, possibly within eyeshot of the Bridge, that had gone up in fire. A total of twenty-three people were in it at the time it burst into flames, and of these, five did not escape. The five deaths included that of a child."

Halsted said, "And then you checked and found there *was* a fire in San Francisco and that five people had died, including a child."

"That's exactly right," said Eldridge. "But here's what got me. One of the five deaths was of a woman, Sophronia Latimer. She had got out safely and then discovered that her eight-year-old boy had not escaped. She ran wildly back into the house, screaming for the boy, and never came out again. The boy's name was Eldridge, so you can see what the woman was shouting in the minutes before her death.

"Eldridge is a very uncommon first name, as I need not tell you, and my feeling is that Miriam captured that particular event, even though it was so far away, entirely because she had been sensitized to the name, by way of myself, and because it was surrounded by such agony."

Rubin said, "You want an explanation, is that it?"

"Of course," said Eldridge. "How did this ignorant girl see a fire in full detail before it happened, get all the facts correct—and believe me, we checked them out—and at three thousand miles away?"

Rubin said, "What makes the three-thousand-mile distance so impressive? These days it means nothing; about one-sixtieth of a second at the speed of light. I suggest that she heard the tale of the fire on radio or television, more likely the latter, and passed it on to you. That's why she chose that story—because of the name Eldridge. She figured it would produce the greatest possible effect on you."

"Why?" asked Eldridge. "Why should she perpetrate such a hoax?"

"Why?" Rubin's voice faded out momentarily, as though with astonishment, then came back in a shout. "Good God, you've been working with these people for years and don't realize how much they *want* to hoax you. Don't you suppose there's a feeling of power that comes with successfully perpetrating a hoax; and money too, don't forget."

Eldridge thought about it, then shook his head. "She doesn't have the brains to put something like that across. It

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takes brains to be a faker—a good one, anyway."

Trumbull said, "Well, now, Voss. There's no reason to suppose she's in it on her own. A confederate is possible. She supplies the hysteria, he supplies the brains."

"Who might the confederate be?" asked Eldridge softly.

Trumbull shrugged. "I don't know."

Avalon cleared his throat and said, "I go along with Tom here, and my guess is that the confederate is the manager of the five-and-ten. He noticed her ability to guess at shoplifters, and thought he could exploit it, put it to use in something more splashy. I'll bet that's it. He was the one who heard about the fire on television, caught the name Eldridge, and coached her."

"How long would it take to coach her?" asked Eldridge. "I keep telling you she's not very bright."

"The coaching wouldn't be difficult," said Rubin. "You say she was incoherent. He would just teach her a few key words: Eldridge, fire, Golden Gate, and so on. She then keeps repeating them in random arrangements and you intelligent parapsychologists fill in the rest."

Eldridge nodded, then said, "That's interesting, except that there was no time to coach the girl. That's what precognition is all about. We know exactly what time she had her spell and we know exactly what time the fire broke out in San Francisco. It so happens the fire broke out at just about the minute that Miriam's spell died down. It was as though once the fire was a fact, no longer a matter of precognition, Miriam lost contact. —So you see, there could not have been any coaching. The news didn't hit the network TV news programs till that evening. That's when *we* found out and began our investigation in depth."

"But wait," said Halsted. "What about the time difference? There's a three-hour time difference between New York and San Francisco, and a confederate in San Francisco—"

"A confederate in San Francisco?" said Eldridge, opening his eyes wide, and staring. "Are you imagining a continental conspiracy? Besides, believe me, I know about the time difference. When I say that the fire started just as Miriam finished, I mean allowing for the time difference. Miriam's spell began at just about 1:15 P.M., Eastern Standard Time, and the fire in San Francisco started at 10:45 A.M., Pacific Standard Time."

Drake said, "I have a suggestion."

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"Go on," said Eldridge.

"This is an uneducated and unintelligent girl—you keep saying that over and over—and she's throwing a fit, an epileptic fit for all I know."

"No," said Eldridge firmly.

"All right, a prophetic fit, if you wish. She's muttering and mumbling and screaming and doing everything in the world but speaking clearly and coherently. She makes sounds which *you* interpret, and which you put together. If it had occurred to you to hear her say something like 'atom bomb,' then the word you interpreted as 'Eldridge' would have become 'Oak Ridge,' for instance."

"And Golden Gate?"

"She might have said something like 'couldn't get'."

"Not bad," said Eldridge. "Except that we know it is hard to understand some of these ecstatics and we're bright enough to make use of modern technology. We routinely tape-record our sessions and we tape-recorded this one. We've listened to it over and over and there is no question but that she said 'Eldridge' and not 'Oak Ridge'; 'Golden Gate' and not 'couldn't get'. We've had different people listen and there is no disagreement on this. Besides, from what we heard, we worked out all the details of the fire *before* we got the facts. And we had to make no modifications afterward. It all agreed exactly."

There was a long silence at the table.

Finally Eldridge said, "Well, there it is. Miriam foresaw the fire three thousand miles away by a full half hour and got all the facts correct."

Drake said uneasily, "Do *you* accept it? Do *you* think it was precognition?"

"I'm trying not to," said Eldridge. "But tell me why I should disbelieve it. I don't want to fool myself into believing it, but what choice do I have? At what point am I fooling myself? If it wasn't precognition, what was it? I had hoped that perhaps one of you gentlemen could tell me."

Again a silence.

Eldridge went on. "I'm left in a position where I must refer to Sherlock Holmes's great precept. 'When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.' In this case, if fakery of any kind is impossible, precognition *must* be the truth. Don't you all agree?"

The silence was longer than before, until Trumbull cried out, "Damn it all, Henry is grinning. No one's asked *him* to explain this. — Well, Henry?"

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Henry coughed. "I should not have smiled, gentlemen, but I couldn't help it when Professor Eldridge used that quotation. It seems the final piece of evidence that you gentlemen *want* to believe."

"The hell we do," said Rubin, frowning.

"Surely then a quotation from President Thomas Jefferson would have sprung to mind."

"What quotation?" asked Halsted.

"I imagine Mr. Rubin knows," said Henry.

"I probably do, Henry, but at the moment I can't think of an appropriate one. Is it in the Declaration of Independence?"

"No, sir," began Henry, when Trumbull interrupted and said, "Let's not play Twenty Questions, Manny. Go on, Henry, what are you getting at?"

"Well, sir, to say that when the impossible has been eliminated, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth is to make the assumption, usually unjustified, that everything that can be considered has indeed been considered. Let us suppose we have considered ten factors. Nine are clearly impossible. Is the tenth, however improbable, therefore true? What if there were an eleventh factor, a twelfth?"

Avalon said severely, "You mean there's a factor we haven't considered?"

"I'm afraid so, sir," said Henry, nodding.

Avalon shook his head. "I can't think what it can be."

"And yet it is an obvious factor, sir. In fact, it's the *most* obvious one."

"What is it, then?" demanded Halsted, clearly annoyed. "Get to the point, man!"

"Well," said Henry, "suppose we begin by also considering precognition to be impossible. In that case—"

Rubin got to his feet, his straggly beard bristling, his eyes magnified through thick-lensed glasses. "Of course! The fire was *set*. The woman could have been coached for weeks in advance. The accomplice goes to San Francisco and they synchronize. She predicts something she *knows* is going to happen. He causes something he knows *she will predict.*"

Henry said, "Are you suggesting, sir, that a confederate would deliberately plan to kill five victims, including an eight-year-old boy?"

"Don't start trusting in the virtue of mankind, Henry," said Rubin. "You're the one who is sensitive to wrongdoing."

"To minor wrongdoing, sir, the kind most people are willing

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to overlook. But I find it difficult to believe that anyone, in order to establish a case of precognition, would deliberately arrange a horrible multimurder. Besides, to arrange a fire in which eighteen of twenty-three people escape and five specific people die requires a bit of precognition in itself."

Rubin turned stubborn. "I can see ways in which five people can be trapped. It's like forcing a card in a conjuring trick—"

"Gentlemen!" said Eldridge peremptorily, and all turned to look at him. "I have not told you the cause of the fire."

He went on, after looking around the table to make sure he had their attention, "It was a stroke of lightning. I don't see how a stroke of lightning could be arranged at a specific time." He spread out his hands helplessly. "I tell you, I've been struggling with this for weeks. I don't want to accept precognition, but— I suppose this spoils your theory, Henry?"

"On the contrary, Professor Eldridge, it confirms it and makes it certain. Ever since you began to tell us this tale of Miriam and the fire, every word you've said has made it more and more certain that fakery is impossible and that precognition has taken place. If, however, precognition is also considered impossible, then it follows, of necessity, Professor, that you have been lying."

Every Black Widower exclaimed at that, with Avalon's shocked "Henry!" loudest of all.

But Eldridge was leaning back in his chair, chuckling. "Of course I was lying. From beginning to end. I wanted to see if all you so-called rationalists would be so eager to accept parapsychological phenomena that you would overlook the obvious rather than spoil your own thrill. —When did you catch on, Henry?"

"It was a possibility from the start, sir, which grew stronger each time you eliminated a solution by inventing more information. I was positive when you mentioned the lightning. That was so dramatic that surely you would have brought it in at the very beginning. To be mentioned only at the very end made it clear that you created it, improvised it, on the spot to block a final hope."

"But why was lying a possibility from the start, Henry?" demanded Eldridge. "Do I *look* like a liar? Can you detect liars the way I had Miriam detect shoplifters?"

"Because it is *always* a possibility, always something to

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be kept in mind and watched for. That is where the remark by President Jefferson comes in."

"What was that?"

"In 1807 Professor Benjamin Silliman of Yale reported seeing the fall of a meteorite at a time when the existence of meteorites was not accepted by scientists. Thomas Jefferson, a rationalist of enormous talent and intelligence, on hearing the report, said, 'I would sooner believe that a Yankee professor would lie than that a stone would fall from heaven.' "

"Yes," said Avalon at once, "but Jefferson was wrong. Silliman did *not* lie and a stone *did* fall from heaven."

"Quite so, Mr. Avalon," said Henry, unruffled. "That is why the quotation is remembered. But considering the great number of times that impossibilities have been reported, and the small number of times they have been proved possible, I felt the odds were with me."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I hope that no reader thinks the solution is unfair. In real life a great many reports of unconventional phenomena are the results of deviations from the truth, either deliberate or unconscious. In fiction, however, when the apparently irrational is rationalized, complicated hoaxes involving all kinds of unlikely devices are presented, and never once, to my knowledge, has something been cleared up by considering the possibility that it was all a lie. Well, let me be the first. —I.A.

"Q"

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All right, we've said it before, but we'll say it again: we're suckers for a good railway-compartment story. Put even a small group of people—in this instance, only three—in a hot, narrow compartment en route to Lahore, India, and a most dramatic situation can develop. This one is a beauty!

MR. JOSLIN'S JOURNEY

by MARY HOCKING

Mr. Joslin was a missionary. A dedicated one. Only a dedicated missionary could have endured the discomfort of ten years in a remote area of Peshawar, to say nothing of the disillusions involved in the close study of a people so durably resilient to betterment in any form.

Mr. Joslin stood on the railway platform and surveyed his companions through the swirl of dust rising from the cracked dirt roads which led down to the station. He was a fastidious man, and ten years in Peshawar had done nothing to make him less sensitive. The stench from the open sewers was as appalling to him as it had been on the first day he arrived in this place; the heat he found more exhausting, the insects more intolerable. As for the people . . .

A denser cloud of dust in the distance heralded the arrival of the train. Mr. Joslin braced his muscles and reminded himself that he was British and must be prepared to die fighting for his rights. Fight he certainly must. A film unit wishing to shoot a particularly lurid scene from the Indian Mutiny could have wished for nothing better than the tumult which would ensue as soon as the train drew into the platform.

Mr. Joslin, who was a timid man by nature, closed his eyes, lowered his head, and charged the train, holding his suitcase before him like a battering ram. Determination, however, counted for little against the wiry agility of the other contestants, and Mr. Joslin, in spite of his gallantry, would have been swept away on the tide had it not been for two men who had already gained entry to one compartment and were engaged in beating off all comers. Since the train stood high above the

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platform, the two men had the advantage and the insurgents moved off to join the assault on the next carriage. Mr. Joslin was left gasping like a fish stranded on a beach after a wave has receded.

The two men stood in the doorway and laughed. They were, Mr. Joslin noted, particularly rapscallion specimens of one of the more belligerent of the hill tribes. Their behavior was not to be tolerated. There was plenty of room in the compartment—even in England it would have seated six with comfort.

Mr. Joslin advanced firmly, holding his suitcase in front of him. He mounted the steps. The two men stood aside. Mr. Joslin, perspiring and short of breath, sat down, feeling rather gratified. Natural authority, he thought as he mopped himself with a handkerchief, will always tell.

The train started. Mr. Joslin had noticed before that when there were only one or two people on a platform the train stood there for a very long time, as though disappointed at not being in greater demand and hoping that by delay it might drum up a little more business; whereas when the platform was crowded, the train appeared to be embarrassed by its popularity and made a quick exit. There was a great deal of screaming and shouting now, as the train moved out, but the platform was empty, which meant that those who had not herded into a compartment must be hanging like ants to the outside or have fallen onto the track.

Mr. Joslin had never actually seen anyone run over by a train, but he was not convinced that this did not happen and felt disquieted by every lurch and bump.

The two men had settled down in the corner seats at the other end of the narrow compartment. Mr. Joslin, who knew the area from which they came, had no difficulty in understanding the silly remarks they were making about his appearance. The remarks were accompanied by sly glances to see how he responded. Mr. Joslin responded by opening his copy of the *Daily Telegraph* and studying it with poker-faced detachment.

He was going home on leave, and his leave started the moment he set foot on the train. He had no intention of letting these fellows know that he spoke their language. He loved his fellow human beings, whatever their color or creed, but at the moment he needed a rest from their company, and the last thing he wanted to do

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was to enter into conversation.

Nevertheless, as he scanned the paper he allowed himself occasional surreptitious glances at his two companions. A colorful people, these hill folk—arrogant, predatory, but undeniably splendid; the bone structure was remarkably fine and the faces were intensely alive; the skin had a dark lustre, the eyes were brilliant. The eyes of these men had an almost hypnotic quality. Mr. Joslin found it difficult to concentrate on the *Daily Telegraph.*

The train jerked along the tortuous track, and sun and shadow played on the faces of his companions, giving them something of the dramatic quality of men in a Rembrandt painting. The train rumbled on. Time passed and Mr. Joslin began to feel rather less poetic. It was toward noon and the heat was building up; soon the compartment would be like a furnace. The seats were not made of leather, but of some substitute material which had extraordinary properties; after he had been sitting on it for a while it appeared to draw itself together, like a huge fist slowly clenching so that fingers of steel seemed to close on Mr. Joslin's thin buttocks. Excruciating agony completely absorbed Mr. Joslin for a time.

His companions chattered, but only odd words registered. Mr. Joslin writhed, squirmed, and sweated. After some time, however, the very oddness of the words which came to him from the other end of the compartment made Mr. Joslin become more attentive in spite of his agony. He concentrated. It took only a few moments to realize that the two men were talking business and that their business was murder.

They were regular travelers on this train, working their own system which, as Mr. Joslin had seen demonstrated, involved getting into an empty compartment and fending off the invading hordes until a suitable victim appeared. Mr. Joslin, outraged by this monstrous conspiracy, thanked God he had been put in a position where he could denounce such villains and possibly save the lives of many innocent wayfarers. As soon as he arrived in Lahore . . .

"—he is rich American, Kamal. He wears the glasses with rims of steel, and he will carry much money with him."

At this point Mr. Joslin realized that it was his own murder which was under discussion. The question which appeared to be at issue was *how* he was to be dispatched. It was not clear whether or not they had decided *when.*

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Mr. Joslin offered some rather more urgent prayers to God and turned a page of the *Daily Telegraph;* the flimsy paper made this at the best of times an awkward process so that his nervousness was not conspicuous.

"The knife, the knife." The man on the seat opposite crooned the word.

"There will be too much blood." His companion was sorrowful, gentle, persusasive. His subsequent words made it apparent that he had no objection to the letting of blood but was afraid it would soil any banknotes which might adorn Mr. Joslin's person.

"Kamal, Kamal." The knife man was deeply offended by the suggestion that an artist of his caliber should perform so crudely as to damage valuable goods, wherever they might be disposed. He leaned forward, the better to plead his cause. "After the last time you cannot refuse." His eyes were open very wide and his gaunt face shone with a mixture of fear, anger, and a terrible eagerness as he pleaded for the supremacy of the knife. His companion, a highly unstable character who giggled a lot, was in favor of strangulation.

Mr. Joslin thought, I must look for the communication cord. This presented problems. He was transported back to his schooldays. Scripture lessons had been given by the Headmaster who had had a formidable ability to note when any one of the twenty boys in the class glanced at the clock. Anyone so doing was punished immediately. The need to locate the position of the cord, and the fear of punishment, momentarily drove all other considerations from Mr. Joslin's mind. His whole life depended on the exact timing of this glance.

"Quicker, so much quicker." The knife man caressed the words as though wooing a lover.

"A long neck, like a chicken." His companion pressed his claim no less ardently.

A mosquito zoomed between Mr. Joslin and the *Daily Telegraph.* He took out his handkerchief and swished it in the air. As usual, the mosquito escaped unharmed. But Mr. Joslin had gained a clear view of the communication cord: it had been fenced round by an amateurishly contrived, but undoubtedly effective, wire cage.

Mr. Joslin took out his ballpoint pen and folded the *Daily Telegraph* on his knee, the crossword facing upward. He scribbled in the margin the possibilities open to him.

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1. Jump. But suppose the door handle stuck?

2. Set fire—to what? His own clothing was quite unsuitable, being of a slow-burning material, and he could hardly suppose his companions would sit quietly while he set fire to either their garments or their beards. Also, he was a non-smoker and had no matches.

3. Wait until the next stop and get out. Much the most attractive solution, provided they had not already decided to kill him before the next stop. All in all, Mr. Joslin did not think he could wait to find out.

4. Frighten them off. But how? He was aware, having spent some time among them, that they were subject to irrational fears. Now, thinking about it, he was not sure to what extent their fears *were* irrational. They were certainly irrational to Mr. Joslin, but it was not inconceivable that to them there was some kind of logical pattern.

He peered at them, his eyelids lowered. They were leaning toward each other as though drawn together over a fire, their faces suffused with light, and there was a radiance about them which in any other circumstances would have made them almost beautiful.

It was difficult to decide what would frighten them. Were he, for example, to stand on his head, burst into tears, and then proceed to undress, this would be quite sufficient to convince the occupants of an English railway carriage that he was a dangerous lunatic. He could not be sure what effect such behavior would have on these men. In any case, he could not go through with such a performance, even to save his life.

"No, no! We leave him under the seat, Hadram, that is much simpler."

Mr. Joslin supposed he could stab them with a pin and then tell them that the tip of the pin was poisoned. The giggling man said, "But the blood, Hadram, the blood," and the knife man replied, "See how withered he is! He will not bleed much."

Once having stabbed them with the pin, Mr. Joslin could tell them he possessed the antidote which he would give to them provided he was alive by the time the train reached the next station.

The train rumbled on, the men discussing murder, Mr. Joslin pondering poison. Beyond the window the sun sparked on rock, and white dust eddied from the track and settled in a thin pall on the floor of the compartment. The two men had stopped talking; they were looking at Mr. Joslin.

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His heart missed a beat. Then there was blackness. The roar of the train was muffled and the compartment was filled with fumes. A tunnel.

Under cover of the coughing and hawking which ensued, Mr. Joslin tried the handle of the door and pushed. Nothing happened. The door was jammed. The fumes, however, had reminded him forcibly of a factor which he had so far overlooked. The window was also jammed—but it was wide-open. A swallow dive through the window now appeared to be Mr. Joslin's only means of escape. He was not athletic, but he had heard of people performing astonishing feats of agility when spurred on by fear.

The train emerged from the tunnel, a steep wall of rock on the far side, light, air, and nothing else on Mr. Joslin's side. Mr. Joslin leaned forward gingerly and squinted down. A long, long way below he could see the tips of trees like tiny exclamation marks scored on the sheer rock face.

Mr. Joslin had a bad head for heights. He took out his handkerchief and mopped his brow. It took a considerable effort of will to hold himself together. He was still alive—he must cling to this consolation; it must mean the two men were waiting for the right moment. What would they consider to be the right moment? After the next stop? Or just before the next stop, so that they would not have long to travel with evidence of their crime and could make a quick getaway in the crowd which would inevitably besiege the carriage. If only he could remember what *was* the next stop.

In any case, he could not risk waiting for that. He must do something at once. The open window. He must throw his suitcase through the window. He should have thought of that before! Once they were robbed of their spoils, he would be of no further interest to them. Or were they so unbalanced that they would kill him for what little money he might have on his person? In which case, it would be an unnecessary extravagance to part with his suitcase.

Mr. Joslin was becoming very confused. He tried desperately to clarify his thoughts. The giggling man said, "All right, Hadram, my dear Hadram, it shall be the knife." The knife man got to his feet and Mr. Joslin's thoughts clarified marvelously.

Before he knew what he was doing, he dropped the heavy suitcase on the floor and suddenly the knife man was sitting down again, nursing one

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crushed bare foot. Mr. Joslin knelt before the suitcase. He smiled at the knife man. He smiled at the giggling man as well, so that he should feel included in the situation. While he was smiling, his fingers pressed the catch, then threw back the lid of the suitcase to reveal the mysteries of Mr. Joslin's wardrobe.

Mr. Joslin took out a shirt and laid it across the knees of the knife man; to his companion he presented a pair of pants and a tie. Neither man seemed impressed. It occurred to Mr. Joslin that more panache was required in this display. He unfolded the shirt and made a clumsy attempt to drape it across the chest of the knife man. He picked up the pair of pants; there was not much one could do with a pair of pants, but he waved them slowly and, he hoped, enticingly in front of the other man who had now stopped giggling.

Mr. Joslin burrowed in his case and found a dressing gown in yellow and mauve cotton which his daughter had sent to him and which he had considered too deplorable ever to be worn. Now, however, he was glad of its gaudy colors. He held it tantalizingly in front of the two men. Apparently they did not like it either. They were both sitting well back in their corners, obviously suspicious and unsure what this performance signified. Mr. Joslin, who had no clear idea himself what his performance signified, draped the dressing gown over the right shoulder of the knife man.

He was sorry he had given the tie to the man who favored strangulation, but decided not to draw attention to it by withdrawing the gift. He made haste to cover the tie with a pair of khaki drill shorts. He had now come to his medicines which he had sandwiched between the clothes in order to protect the bottles.

Mr. Joslin believed in being prepared for all eventualities and his supply of medicines was extensive; there were a lot of bottles. He was about to push them to one side when a brown hand reached forward and grasped one of the bottles. The knife man had decided to join in the game. He held the bottle up to the light, shook it, then pretended, without unstoppering it, to quaff the contents, an act which was accompanied by a vigorous rubbing of the stomach and much rolling of the eyes. He played the game better than Mr. Joslin.

His companion then grabbed a large bottle of pills which he rattled like castanets about his head; he had begun to giggle in

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a way which Mr. Joslin felt was altogether too uncontrolled. The knife man was now getting rid of the bottles by the simple method of tossing them through the window. Mr. Joslin could see that if he did not regain control, the suitcase would soon be emptied and the game finished. The knife man was already behaving as though he was conducting a search rather than playing a game.

Mr. Joslin grasped a pair of trousers and endeavored, by pushing his hands into the legs, to manipulate them in the manner of a puppetmaster, making the trousers perform a grotesque dance on the remaining contents of the suitcase. The giggling man, who seemed the more easily diverted of the two, appeared to be fascinated by this and made a shy gesture indicating, as Mr. Joslin thought, that he would like to try. Mr. Joslin gave him the trousers and then realized that it was the belt which had caught the man's attention.

The knife man, Mr. Joslin now saw with horror, was unpacking his shaving kit. The train lurched, swayed, and bumped, and Mr. Joslin was thrown forward. The knife man momentarily lost his hold on the shaving kit. Mr. Joslin delved frantically and unearthed the precious roll of silk which he was taking home as a present for his daughter. He wound it round his body and, wiggling in what he hoped was an attention-provoking manner, he rotated slowly and found himself facing the astonished gaze of an English army officer. The train had reached the next stop.

Relief was too much for Mr. Joslin. He stumbled forward, tripped over the silk, and landed on his knees at the feet of his savior, gibbering incoherently.

The army officer said, "Disgusting!" and a voice from the platform said, "Fellah ought to be horsewhipped."

The army officer thrust Mr. Joslin aside and began to collect the contents of the case which were festooned about the persons of Mr. Joslin's tormentors. Mr. Joslin, who was not quite clear what was happening, murmured, "Very kind." The army officer whipped the silk from Mr. Joslin's midriff and stuffed it and the garments into the suitcase. He then shut the case and threw it onto the platform.

Mr. Joslin cried, "No, no!"

The army officer said sternly, "Get out before I throw you out."

"You don't understand—"

"I understand only too well!"

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The army officer took Mr. Joslin by the shoulders and booted him out of the carriage, informing him as he did so that he was a rotten little pervert and a disgrace to his country. By the time Mr. Joslin had picked himself up, the train was moving out. The army officer had said goodbye to his friend and had moved away from the window, but the two hill men were there, laughing and waving at Mr. Joslin.

The terrible suspicion came to Mr. Joslin that he had been the victim, not of an attempted murder, but of a particularly cruel practical joke. Perhaps the two hill men were even now telling the army officer how they had hoodwinked and terrified the little missionary. Mr. Joslin hoped the army officer did not speak their language. Cowardice, he was sure, would rate even more contempt than perversion in the army officer's view. Mr. Joslin sat on his suitcase and began to cry.

There was no other train to Lahore that day, so Mr. Joslin had plenty of time to meditate on his humiliation. When the train came the next day, he traveled in extreme discomfort in a very crowded carriage. He had by now missed his plane. There had been a strike and all the planes were full. He had small hope of getting a seat when he presented himself at the airport.

In fact, however, he was lucky. The clerk at the reservations counter informed him that one seat was available: it had been reserved by a Major Carruthers who had had the misfortune to be murdered in a railway carriage the previous day.

The clerk handed the ticket to Mr. Joslin and wished him a good journey.

"Q"

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Mrs. Sutherland had a confession to make to the police, but Lieutenant Foley had to let her tell the story in her own way . .

OVER THE BORDERLINE

by JEFF SWEET

"Don't you see? He had to be stopped."

"Stopped, Mrs. Sutherland? Stopped from doing what?"

"If I hadn't acted she would have died. He would have killed her."

"Who, Mrs. Sutherland? Who would he have killed?"

"You're looking at me like you don't believe me, Lieutenant Foley. You think I'm just a batty old lady, don't you? An old lady who's lost her marbles."

"No, I don't. Really, I don't."

"Like crazy Mrs. Jessup who's always calling the police or the F.B.I. about enemy agents hiding under her bed. I'm right, aren't I? That's what you think."

"I swear, Mrs. Sutherland, I don't think that at all."

"Then why don't you believe me?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Mrs. Sutherland, it isn't that I don't believe you. It's just that I—well, I guess I really don't *understand.* I mean, I don't have the full picture."

"I've tried to answer all your questions, Lieutenant."

"Yes, and I appreciate that, Mrs. Sutherland. But still—"

"What?"

"Look, I have an idea. Why don't you tell me about it again, from start to finish? I promise you I won't interrupt."

"From start to finish? Yes, maybe that would be best, and I suppose the best place to start would be with Cora and Jim. Cora and Jim Franklin. Such a nice couple. They remind me of the late Mr. Sutherland and myself when we were young. A very nice couple, the Franklins. Of course, they have their problems. More than their share. She was pregnant when they got married, you know That's not always the best way to start a marriage, especially since the baby wasn't Jim's. That awful Harrington Furth."

"Uh, Mrs. Sutherland—"

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"Lieutenant, you promised you wouldn't interrupt."

"I know, Mrs. Sutherland, but I'm afraid I'm a little lost. Who is Harrington Furth?"

"Lieutenant, if you will hold your horses I'll get to that, I promise you. All in good time. But you mustn't interrupt."

"Yes, Mrs. Sutherland."

"Where was I?"

"Harrington Furth."

"Oh, yes, Harrington. A very rich, very irresponsible young man. His father is the president of Furth Electronics, you know—a very distinguished man. But Harrington, I'm afraid, doesn't take after his father. Or should I say Harrington *didn't* take after his father? Oh, well, you understand my meaning, I'm sure. It must have been very hard on old Mrs. Furth, having a son like Harrington. Always racing around in his fancy cars, always getting into trouble. And his father always coming to the rescue. I swear, if it had been me, I would have let that young man stew in his own juice! It might have taught him a sense of responsibility. And the way he drank!

"Anyway, there was poor Cora. She hadn't married Jim yet, you know. Jim was going with the Stanton girl then—the one with the big false eyelashes and all the teeth. What Jim saw in her I don't know. But like I say, there was poor Cora. Her mother had just died on the operating table and Cora was all alone. She was scared and vulnerable. And that awful Harrington saw this and—well, he took advantage of the situation, and when he'd gotten what he wanted he left Cora flat. Not too long after she found out she was pregnant."

"You mean with Furth's child?"

"That's what I said, didn't I? Really, Lieutenant, you must learn to listen. Anyway, around this time the Stanton girl left Jim and took up with young Harrington, which in my opinion served them both right. Meanwhile, Jim was desperate, almost suicidal, and then, one day, in came Cora. Did I tell you Jim was an obstetrician?"

"No."

"Well, he was, and all the girls on the staff at the hospital thought he was the handsomest doctor around. But he didn't pay any attention to them. And then, as I said, in came Cora and he told her she was pregnant and she just stood there, very bravely, fighting back the tears. But, of course, it wasn't any use. Before you could blink an eye she was in his arms, crying like a little girl. And he was holding her so tenderly. It was love from that first mo-

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ment, I could tell. I could tell right off because it was just like that when Mr. Sutherland and I met. Except I wasn't pregnant and Mr. Sutherland wasn't an obstetrician.

"What I'm talking about is the way you—well, you know in your heart when someone's just right for you. You don't think about it, you just *know*. That's the way it was with Mr. Sutherland and me. And that's the way it was with Cora and Jim.

"I'll never forget the day Jim proposed. She was in her eighth month then and he'd been seeing a lot of her. 'Marry me,' he said. 'No,' she said, 'I couldn't do that to you. I couldn't make you part of my shame,' she said. I remember how difficult it was for me to keep from shouting out to her, 'Don't be a fool, Cora! He loves you! Don't give up this chance for happiness!'

"But I needn't have worried because that's just what he said to her himself. 'I love you,' he said. 'You give my life purpose.. If you don't say yes, I don't know what I'll do.' To make a long story short, she did say yes and they were married soon after. He even delivered the baby."

"Mrs. Sutherland, what has this got to do with—"

"Lieutenant, please!"

"Sorry, Mrs. Sutherland."

"As I said, they were married and were so happy, and the baby didn't look a bit like Harrington. But I could tell they weren't over the worst of it. I knew in my bones that tragedy was going to strike, but for the longest time I didn't know how.

"To tell you the truth, I was having an awful time sleeping. I finally had to go to Dr. Sumroy and get a prescription for sleeping pills. I'd never used them before because I've heard so many stories of old people accidentally taking an overdose. And not just old people. Young people, too. It's supposed to be especially bad if you take them when you've been drinking, though in my case that was no problem. But I was having so much trouble sleeping because of all my worrying about Cora and Jim that I just *knew* something tragic was going to happen even though I didn't know what.

"Then, suddenly, it came to me. I can't tell you how it came to me because I honestly don't know how to explain such things. Call it woman's intuition, if you like, but I knew what was going to happen. *Harrington was going to kill Cora in an automobile accident!* It was inevitable. He'd just bought a new sports car—one of those fancy foreign things that makes

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a lot of noise, and it was common knowledge he was speeding recklessly all over town. So you see, it was logical.

"Of course, I couldn't let it happen. I remember how heartbroken I was when Mr. Sutherland died in an accident, only he wasn't killed by a foreign car. I was so miserable, I nearly died. So what was I supposed to do? I knew what would happen if something weren't done, and I couldn't just sit quiet and *let* it happen. I had to do something. But what?

"Then, today, an amazing coincidence brought me the answer. I came into the city to shop on Fifth Avenue for my nephew's birthday, and I stopped into a restaurant on Forty-Seventh Street. Not too far away from Radio City and Rockefeller Center, you know the area? And who was in the restaurant but young Harrington!

"I went up to him, and I said, 'Mr. Furth?' He smiled. I'll say that for him, he had a nice smile. 'Mr. Furth,' I said, 'I want to talk to you.' He stood up, a little woozy from all the liquor he'd been drinking, and offered me a seat, which I accepted. 'Mr. Furth,' I said, 'I'm going to speak plain. I know what's going to happen.' 'What's going to happen?' he said, still smiling. 'I know you're going to kill Cora Franklin with that fancy foreign car,' I answered.

" 'How did you find out?' he asked, obviously surprised. 'Never you mind how I found out,' I said. 'What I'm saying is so, isn't it? You're going to kill her with your sports car, aren't you?'

" 'Yes,' he said, 'that's so.'

"He admitted it! With a smile! There wasn't a trace of regret anywhere on his devilish face. He actually seemed happy about it! I knew I was in the presence of great evil.

"He excused himself and went to the men's room. I suddenly knew what I had to do. I opened my handbag and took out the sleeping pills I had got from Dr. Sumroy, and I dropped something like two dozen of them into his coffee. I left, waited until I was sure it was all over, then came here to turn myself in. And that, Lieutenant, is my confession."

"I see."

"Do you believe me?"

"Yes, I believe you, Mrs. Sutherland."

"One thing you have to know—I did this for them, Lieutenant. For Jim and Cora and the baby. You have to realize that it was the only way. You do understand, don't you?"

"Yes, Mrs. Sutherland, I think I do."

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A few minutes later, after Mrs. Sutherland had been led away, Lieutenant Foley turned to Sergeant Warren, who was standing a few feet away. "Well, that settles that," he said.

"Lieutenant, maybe I'm some kind of an idiot," said the sergeant, "but I don't see that it settles anything. Her story about the overdose in Maxwell's coffee jibes, and she matches the waiter's description, but I'll be damned if I can figure out why she kept calling Taylor Maxwell by the name Harrington Furth."

"Sergeant, Taylor Maxwell was an actor."

"I still don't get it, sir."

"I've just been looking at his résumé. For the past few years he's been a regular on an afternoon TV soap opera called *The Will To Live*," explained the lieutenant. "The name of the character he played was Harrington Furth."

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a *NEW* Schlock Homes story by

ROBERT L. FISH

The second case that engaged the attention of Schlock Homes after he had come out of retirement from his bee-farm on the Upson Downs—a case (you will not be surprised to learn) that Schlock Homes solved while his brilliantly analytical mind was on something else; a case (you will not be surprised to learn) that perplexed The Great Detective as no other problem ever had (but we say that about all his cases!) . . .

THE ADVENTURE OF THE HANSOM RANSOM

by ROBERT L. FISH

In considering the many adventures I have been fortunate enough to share with my good friend Mr. Schlock Homes, I am forced to the amazing conclusion that his activities following his return from retirement on the Upson Downs put any of his previous efforts to shame. The man seemed determined to make up for the years lost in bee-farming; his energies were prodigious. Nor had he lost any of his remarkable abilities; if anything the results of his analyses and deductions were more startling than ever.

For example, in going over my notes for the balance of the year '72, I find reference to cases which not only furthered the incredible legend of Homes, but which also did much to strengthen the ties between our beloved Britain and many of our former colonies. In Tel Aviv, to mention one instance, Homes was able to capture the culprit who fed doped oats to the favourite in the tough Kosher Stakes, a horse noted for its ability on heavy and wet tracks. Readers of these memoirs may recall the affair as *The Adventure of the Jewish Mudder and Fodder.*

But not all of Homes's work

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took him abroad; in August of that year he was of singular service to the noted author, Mr. Stanley Yelling, who was plagiarized in his famous biography, *The Tome of the Unknown Soldier.* Still more interesting to me, however, was a case which Homes resolved while his mind was on other problems, an affair I find delineated in my journal as *The Adventure of the Hansom Ransom.*

I had finished my rounds, that warm September afternoon, and had returned to our quarters at No. 221 B Bagel Street to find Homes hunched over his study table, the room full of smoke from the pipe upon which he was puffing furiously, and the floor littered with crumpled scraps of paper from his many calculations. As I entered the room, he turned to me a face pale with bafflement.

"Homes!" I cried, frightened at his wan complexion. I instantly put my bag aside and hurried to the sideboard, pouring a generous tot of brandy. "What is the matter?"

He flourished a sheet of note-paper in my face as I hastily swallowed my drink.

"As ingenious a code as ever I have faced!" said he, grimacing. "It was delivered several hours ago, but as yet I have been unable to decipher it."

I came to stand beside him and read the telegram over his shoulder. As Homes had so accurately stated, it was obviously in code and presented itself as unintelligible jargon. It read as follows:

"*Gotter see yer raht away. Hi'll stop rahnd yer flat fourish, abaht. 'Arry 'Iggins.*"

"Note the beastly cleverness of the writer!" Homes said half-angrily, "intermixing real words with this other nonsense! The word 'see' and the word 'away,' the word 'stop' and the word 'flat.' I've tried 'see away stop flat,' 'see stop flat away,' 'away see flat stop,' 'flat stop see away.'" He paused as our doorbell suddenly rang. "But I'm afraid this puzzle must wait, for unless I am mistaken, we are about to have a visitor."

He hastily straightened his study table as our page boy ushered in a person who was pitiful in appearance. He cringed as he came to a shuffling stop before us, his head bent, his eyes cast down to his cracked shoes, his fingers nervously twisting a worn cap. He stood first on one foot and then on the other as if afraid to raise his head, until Homes took pity on the poor fellow

"Here," he said in a kindly tone "Take that basket chair,

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and tell us your story. Other than the fact that by profession you are a hostler, I know nothing of your problem."

The man's face gaped in astonishment as he sank into the chair. Even I, familiar as I am with Homes's unusual powers, could not see the slightest basis for his deduction. Homes smiled at our confusion.

"It is really quite simple, Watney," said he, tenting his fingers. "The straight flat crease across the front of the trousers clearly indicates many hours of constant leaning over the edge of something approximately thirty inches from the floor. Since this is the height of a standard feeding bin, we can assume our visitor has something to do with stables. The chalk dust in the crease between the left thumb and forefinger looks suspiciously like Gentian Green, used as a germicide for cleansing saddles. Now, add to this the fact that even as our guest sits there, he unconsciously crooks the fingers of his left hand into the best position for holding reins, and there can be no doubt that for years he served as a hostler."

Our visitor gaped, his admiration for Homes's analysis visible on his face. Had he known Schlock Homes as long and as well as I have, he would not have been so surprised.

" 'ow yer does it I can't imagine, Guv'nor," he said, shaking his head, 'but yer dead raht. Me name is 'Arry 'Iggins and I've been an 'ustler all me life, mostly down at the Spider and Fly Billiards Parlour. I been so upset by the loss of me boss's 'ansom I guess I forgot to wash me 'ands."

He hastily wiped the offending chalk from his fingers and sat more erect.

"What 'appened," said he, now visibly more at ease, "is some bloke I never seen afore in me life comes over to where I'm waitin' in front of me boss's 'ouse, see, an' me sittin' up atop the 'ansom like always, and tells me there's a sucker over at the Spider and Fly wiv more brass than skill, lookin' for a game. Well, I couldn't pass that up, could I? Course not, 'specially when the boss don't usually come down till eleven, so I asks the chap would 'e be so kind as to look arter me 'orse and buggy till I gets back, and off I goes to the Spider and Fly, but when I gets there, there ain't no more mark than straight cues! So I 'urries back to me 'ansom an' me rig is gorn!"

He shook his head lugubriously.

"Can't trust a blinkin' soul these days," he said sadly. "Went rahnd t' the coppers and

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they wasn't no more 'elp than a bustid leg! And I'm scared t' tell me boss. 'E wasn't too 'appy wiv me before, and this ain't goin' t' make 'im love me no 'arder!"

Homes nodded sympathetically.

"Well," he said, smiling to make our guest comfortable, "consider me at your service. Tell me, was there anything special about this particular hansom that made it more worthy of stealing than any other? Plastic harness-breeching-straps, perhaps? Imported check-reins? Gold-embossed hub-caps?"

"Naw!" said our guest disdainfully. "Can't imagine anyone floggin' that 'ansom wiv so many new ones practically askin' to be stole. This was mostly used for shoppin', this 'ansom was, only the big four-in-'and is in the shop wiv a sprung yoke, so me boss asks me to drive 'im abaht in this one. Matter of fact, I figures at first the chap just got tired of waitin' and went orf and me 'orse followed 'em, me 'orse bein' a friendly-type beast."

"A possibility," Homes conceded. "And may I ask who your employer might be?"

"Well," said the little man, " 'e might be the Queen o' the May, but 'e ain't. I 'eard that one on the telly," he added in hasty apology. "Actually, 'e's some big-wheel foreigner from be'ind the Iron Curtain. 'Eads up their Embassy 'ere in Lunnon. But we ain't supposed to mention no names."

"I see." Homes nodded. "And the man you left in charge of your hansom?"

"Never seen the bloke before," said our guest, "but 'e was a big one, 'e was! Seven foot tall at least, twenty stone of weight if an ounce, wiv a bad limp in one leg an' a big brush of orange 'air."

Homes shot erect in his chair, his nostrils flaring.

" 'Omes!" I cried. "I mean, Homes! What is it?"

"Later!" he said fiercely, and turned his attention back to our visitor. "Is there any other information you can furnish which might be of help?"

"That's abaht the lot, Guv'nor," the little man said, sad to be of such little use in his own behalf. He sounded wistful. "I don't suppose yer would consider takin' on a little no-account case like this, would yer, sir?"

"I would not miss it for the world!" Homes replied fervently, and came to his feet. "Well, since I imagine you can be reached at this Spider and Fly Billiards Parlour at any time, it is needless for you to leave an

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address. Be assured I shall get right to it and advise you of the outcome of my investigation as soon as possible."

He waved aside the small man's profuse attempts to thank him, and was already pacing the floor, his brow furrowed in thought and his hands locked behind his back, even before our page had shown our guest to the street.

"Really, Homes," I said in mild surprise. "I have seldom seen you so wrought. And merely over a hansom whose horse has undoubtedly wandered away!"

"Are you deaf?" he inquired, swinging upon me suddenly. "Sometimes I fear for you, Watney! Did you not hear the description of the man with whom our small friend left his hansom? Think, Watney, think! Does it not strike a familiar chord?"

I considered the little man's description carefully: seven feet tall, twenty stone of weight, a bad limp in one leg, and a shock of orange hair. I was about to deny any recognition when I saw a faint chance. "You are thinking of Professor Marty, Homes?" I asked. "The one they call—with reason—The Butcher?"

"We cannot overlook the possibility, Watney!"

"True, Homes," I conceded, thinking about it. "Certainly Professor Marty never does anything on a small scale. Should he now be involved in a scheme to steal all means of transport, within a very short time he could bring all London to its feet!"

"I doubt that is his motive," said Homes, shaking his head. "With the shortage of parking space, such an effort would be doomed to failure. Where in all London would he find room for more than two or three?" He paced the floor in thought, seeking an answer. Suddenly his head came up. "Unless—"

"Yes, Homes?" I asked eagerly.

"Our client said the hansom was an old one, did he not?"

"He did."

"I believe I have it!" Homes exclaimed and fell into a chair, beginning to scribble on pieces of paper with pen and ink.

"Homes," I said reproachfully. "With a problem involving the Professor upon us, you have gone back to the puzzle of the note delivered this morning!"

"No, no," said he, continuing to scribble. "I should like to, for it bothers me to leave it unsolved, but what I am writing is *for* the Professor. If you would be so kind as to have our page round up the Bagel Street Regulars, I am sure we will be

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in a position to scotch this nefarious scheme of the Professor's in a very short time!"

To this end I hastened to summon our page and give him proper instructions, while Homes—reminded by me, I am afraid—returned to the puzzle of the morning message, but before he could get much beyond "stop flat see away" and "stop see away flat," the Bagel Street Regulars came swarming up the stairs under the leadership of a ragged small street arab known, in the current fashion of name and initial, as Hasser I. Homes put aside the cryptic message, a bit reluctantly, I thought, and gave them their orders.

"A tall man, at least seven feet in height," said he sternly, while they hung on every word. "He weighs about twenty stone. He limps badly and has bright orange hair. I have identical notes for each of you; the one who locates him will give it to him. I suggest you split up, each taking a different billiard parlour, since these seem to be his usual base of operations. And tuppence-ha'penny extra for the brave lad who first locates him!"

I turned to him as the lads fled eagerly down the steps, each clutching his note tightly. "Your note to the Professor?" I asked, mystified.

"Merely an invitation to him for a chat," he said enigmatically, and returned at once to the crumpled sheet of paper upon his study table. And so passed the following hour, silent except for his occasional mutter, *sotto voce*, " 'Flat see away stop'? 'Flat stop away see'? It is impossible! 'Away flat stop see'? 'See spot—I mean stop—' But here is one of our Regulars back already, I do believe."

It was Hasser I, and he catapulted into the room, panting.

"I have located him, Mr. Homes!" he said proudly, fighting for breath. "He is involved in a snooker game at a billiard parlour in Limehouse called The Quicksand Club."

"You gave him my note?" Homes demanded fiercely.

"I did, indeed, sir. He was in the middle of a long run and said he would be along as soon as he finished."

"Good," Homes said, and reached for his purse. "Here is a shilling for each lad involved in the hunt, as well as the extra bonus I promised you. Well done, Hasser I!" Homes fell back into his chair as the lad went clattering down the steps. "Well, Watney," he continued, as the front door slammed, "I hope this affair with the Professor can soon be settled,

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for the matter of this infernal coded message is beginning to prey upon my mind."

"How do you plan on handling the Professor, Homes?" I asked curiously.

"Quite simply," he said, but before he could continue there was a loud sound in the passage and the door to our quarters burst open. Professor Marty brusquely brushed aside our page and came to stand above Homes, glaring down.

"Homes," he said gratingly. "What is the nonsense contained in this note?" He pulled a slip of paper from his pocket, dug about in his weskit for his spectacles, and read aloud in a sneering tone. " 'Professor Marty, you will kindly forget about holding the foreign hansom for ransom and return it at once! Signed, Schlock Homes.' "

Homes nodded to him politely, but his face was expressionless and his voice cold.

"If you will take the large chair, Professor, I shall be pleased to explain." He waited until the Professor had sunk into the chair before continuing. "In the first place, there could never have been the slightest doubt as to why you stole that trap yesterday—"

"I needed something to run around in—"

Homes disregarded him. "Considering the age and lack of special features, the carriage undoubtedly falls into the category of an antique, and therefore must be quite valuable. As a valuable antique, it must therefore be worthy of a substantial ransom."

"I never thought of that," Professor Marty mumbled, shaking his head.

"However," Homes continued sternly, paying no attention to the man's mumbling, "it makes no difference as to its value. Since I am on to your scheme, there is nothing for you to do now but admit failure and return the carriage to its rightful owner."

Professor Marty started up, his face red. His voice was a growl.

"And what makes you think I'll do a fool thing like that?"

"Because, if you do not, I shall make London too hot to hold you," Homes returned, his eyes narrowed. He continued to hold the Professor in his steady gaze. "In addition to returning the hansom, you will write a note of apology to the owner. You will say you are sorry you took the hansom and in compensation for the time you used it, you will send him some small present."

"You're mad!"

"You will send him some

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small present," Homes repeated firmly. "Let me see . . . To-morrow being Thursday, the traditional day for English servants to enjoy their liberty, a thoughtful gesture would be some affair to save the mistress of the house the task of cooking their evening dinner. The Bow Street Banquet, for example, or comps to McDonalds—"

"Now you just wait a minute!" Professor Marty began in a roar, and then suddenly calmed down. He leaned forward in his chair, his tiny piggish eyes intent upon Homes's stern visage. "You say return the trap. You then suggest that to-morrow night—the servants' night out—I send these people tickets which will also take them from their home—to a banquet, that is, of course. Is that your suggestion?"

"It is not a suggestion," Homes said coldly. "It is a demand."

Professor Marty came to his feet with an effort.

"Homes," he said with deep feeling, "you are a find! I mean a fiend!" He shrugged hopelessly. "I have no choice. It shall be as you say." He sighed and limped from the room, a broken man.

"You have done it again, Homes!" I exclaimed in admiration, but my friend merely shrugged off the compliment and returned to his study table, glowering down at the sheet of note-paper which seemed intent upon perplexing him as no other problem had since I have known him.

I came to breakfast the following morning to find Homes dozing fitfully in his chair, the lamp still burning, and the floor covered with the refuse of his calculations. Fearing for his well-being should he continue to concentrate on this one problem, I hastened to open the morning journal in search of some more interesting divertissement, just as he stirred and sat up, stretching. I considered him anxiously.

"No luck, Homes?"

"None," he said glumly. "It is fiendish! And yet I am sure the answer is in those simple four words: 'see,' 'away,' 'stop,' and 'flat.' I have even tried the first letters in all combinations; they form 'sasf,' fass,' 'fsas,' 'assf,' 'ssaf'—"

"Come, Homes," I said soothingly, "let me have Mrs. Essex fix you a nice plate of creamed chutneys. You know how they always calm you."

He considered me balefully. "Do not commiserate with me, Watney! Nor treat me as an invalid!"

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"Never, Homes," I said as I hurriedly turned the pages of the newspaper. Suddenly I sat erect, certain I had the solution to my friend's problem.

"Homes," I exclaimed, "here is a case which I am sure will interest you. Last evening the dwelling of Stannous Fluoride, the Polish Ambassador, was burgled! It seems all the servants were out—they had accepted an invitation to dine at some banquet or other—"

"No, no, Watney," said he, wearily. "I should enjoy resolving the problem, since I feel strongly about treatment afforded guests of our Government, but I cannot give up so easily on this puzzle."

He returned to the crumpled paper before him, and then suddenly all trace of sleepiness fled from his countenance.

"Watney!" he cried, excitement flushing his face. "I am a fool! The answer is simplicity itself!" He swung about, one finger still pointing to the sheet of paper on his study table. "My error was in discounting the writer's ability to misspell!"

"Homes," I exclaimed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean it was not the *word* 'see'—it is the *letter* 'C'! The message now becomes crystal-clear!" His thin finger pointed. "*C stop away flat.* It can only refer to the C-stop of the giant organ at Albert Hall, since it is the only organ I am familiar with! Fortunately, I am still in possession of the tuning fork I won at a bean-eating contest in my second year at public school. A note to the organist at the Hall, if you please, Watney, offering my services."

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The new story about Loren Mensing, a professor of Law at City University Law School, is not at all what we expected . . . Detectives can be active, constantly on the move, or they can be sedentary, solving cases in an armchair. Of the latter one of the rarer subdivisions is the telephone 'tec—the investigator who never visits the scene of the crime, the authenticator who never inspects the physical evidence, the interrogator who never questions the suspects; he simply hears the facts in the case over the telephone, cross-examines his caller, and—presto!

MURDER OF A MALE CHAUVINIST

by FRANCIS M. NEVINS, Jr.

"Loren, why is it that all you males can get so enraged about the war and racism and pollution but as soon as someone mentions women's rights you start giggling under your breath?" the girl asked him.

"Female chauvinist pig," Loren Mensing replied good-naturedly.

He was sitting behind his battered government-gray desk in his cramped office above the law library of City University Law School. The bookshelves were jammed chaotically with legal treatises, volumes of the National Reporter System, and detective novels. His desk and most of the floor space were littered with miscellaneous correspondence and the research papers of his Federal Jurisdiction students. One of those students sat across the desk from him.

Even though Gael Erwin had attended three of his courses in as many semesters, Mensing still didn't quite know what to make of her. She had a good mind, a bird-bright personality, a perky little face beneath a mop of dark curls, a slim body beneath her old sweater and blue jeans; and she had not the first idea in the world what she was doing in law school except that she seemed to have a notion that on her admission to the bar, the ghettos would vanish,

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women would be magically liberated, the air and water would be purified, and peace would descend upon the earth. The very first words she had ever said to him were: "Loren, do you know you look like a great big grizzly bear with glasses?" She was the only student of his who had the childlike naturalness to call him by his first name rather than Professor Mensing, as the other students did, or Monk, as his faculty mates did. Perhaps that was why he liked her so much.

Mensing had asked her in to discuss her research paper, which was on sex discrimination suits in the Federal courts, but the talk had quickly shifted from legal technicalities to Women's Lib. He was about to tease her with his impersonation of a female airline pilot welcoming passengers aboard and of a frog-voiced male steward rumbling "Coffee, tea, or milk?" but the phone rang first. He clawed through a pile of advance sheets and picked up the feceiver. "Mensing," he said.

"Would you have said 'Excuse me' to me if I were a man?" Gael Erwin stage-whispered.

"Oh, hello there, Professor Mensing," came the voice on the far end. "This is Sergeant Charley Hough, from the Detective Squad. You remember me, don't you? A year ago, when you were legal adviser for the Department and helped us out with a few cases?"

"Oh, yes. How is everything, Sergeant? Haven't seen you in ages. Working hard?"

"You don't know the half of it, Professor. If I see my kids one night in three it's blind luck. Uhh . . . we've got kind of a funny problem out here and I don't really know what to do with it. Could you do me a favor and come down to Headquarters tonight and talk it over?"

"What kind of problem?"

"Murder, and a dying message, and I think some kind of Women's Liberation angle. Do you know they've put so much pressure on the Department that when we write up our reports we can't say Mrs. or Miss any more, we've got to put M-S-period in front of a woman's name whether she's married or single or whatever. That's the 'in' thing now with these crazy dames. Drives me up the wall.

"Anyway, the victim is Robin Apgar. I guess you've heard of him. Used to write word-game and puzzle books and wound up running the talk show on local TV?"

"I've heard of him but don't think I've ever seen him. My

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taste in late-night TV runs to old movies. He was murdered, I take it?"

"Yeah, sometime this morning, out at his place in Stone Canyon. Beautiful isolated house, fifteen rooms, heated indoor swimming pool, the works. No neighbors for half a mile in any direction. Someone smashed his skull this morning with a bronze nude statuette he kept in his study. Body was found around noon by Sam White, Apgar's business manager. M.E. places the time of death at between 10:30 A.M. and noon.

"We got one beautiful break. Apgar was married but separated from his wife and having a real swinging life. Mrs. A. was about ready to file for divorce, so she hired a private snoop named Jerry Lusky to keep his house under surveillance for overnight female guests. Lusky was staked out in his camper in the hills above the house, had the place covered with his binoculars all morning. When he saw all the Department cars parking by the house he figured something had happened and came right down and told us the whole story. In the time the killing could have been done, Apgar had four visitors, two female and two male. Lusky got the license numbers on all four autos.

"Before I get to these four parties, let me tell you about the message Apgar left behind him. According to the M.E., he couldn't have lived more than a few seconds after the killer whacked him with that statuette. But he lived long enough to leave us a clue. He grabbed a pen and wrote two letters on a blank piece of paper from his desk, and then crumpled the paper up into a ball and rolled over on top of it—probably because the killer was still in the house and Apgar didn't want him to find his name written out in plain sight if he came back into the study."

"Well, if you've got the killer's name, Sergeant, what do you need me for?" Mensing asked, sweetly reasonable.

"Apgar died before he could finish the name, Professor. All he managed to leave us was two initials."

"Which were?"

"M S," Hough pronounced very distinctly. "That's where the Women's Lib angle comes in. Now, let me tell you about the four visitors. At 10:42 A.M. Lusky clocked in a car which we found out belongs to Mike Stanley, an editor for Pitman House. We talked to Stanley and he told us that Apgar was doing a book for Pitman House called *The Women's Lib Joke Book*. Stanley said he'd gone

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out to have a talk with Apgar about the manuscript but he claims he left Apgar alive and well at about 11:00. Lusky confirms that was the time Visitor Number One left.

"Visitor Number Two drove up at 11:10 and left at 11:16. By her license number she turned out to be Monica St. Vincent, the TV actress. We talked to her. She'd been having a thing with Apgar, he'd broken it off a month ago, and she fell hard. She says she begged him to take her back and he refused even to say one word to her. She says she left in tears but denies she ever laid a finger on him.

"Visitor Number Three—now don't faint, Professor—does not have the initials MS. She drove up at 11:35 in an old jalopy. Her name's Elaine Gomulka, she's built like a truck, and she's a Women's Lib organizer. She'd heard about this Lib joke book Apgar was doing and came out to demand that he burn the manuscript. She says she pounded on the door but wasn't able to get in. She told us she knew Apgar was inside and figured he was afraid to face her. After seven or eight minutes she got disgusted, left a note under his door calling him a chauvinist male pig, and took off."

"Can Lusky confirm that she never got inside the house?" Mensing asked.

"No. There's a roofed outer vestibule before you reach the front door, and from Lusky's angle of vision on the hillside he couldn't be sure one way or the other. We haven't found her prints inside or any other physical evidence that she got in, but we think the killer wore gloves anyway.

"The fourth visitor of course was White, the business manager. He got there just before noon for a lunch date and conference with Apgar. He says he found the front door unlocked, walked in, found Apgar dead in the study, and called Headquarters right away.

"Well, what do you think, Professor?"

Mensing sighed and rocked back in his creaky swivel chair. "Sergeant, I've never heard of so many MS's in one place outside of a bra-burning demonstration." Gael Erwin made a face at him. "Let's go over the possibilities. MS may stand quite simply for Mike Stanley, the editor. Or, not quite so simply, for Monica St. Vincent, the actress. Or it could be the Women's Lib-approved abbreviation for being female, which would point to Elaine Gomulka. Or—yes, I almost forgot. It might have absolutely nothing to do with initials or Women's

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Lib! Didn't you say that Apgar had the manuscript of his *Women's Lib Joke Book?*"

"Yeah. So what?"

"MS, Sergeant. The universal abbreviation used by writers and editors for the word manuscript!"

"Yeah," Hough said, "but, Professor, Apgar wasn't no editor. He was a word-game inventor and TV talk-show host. If he wanted us to look at his manuscript, why didn't he say so in English?"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Mensing interrupted. "Word games, word games. What is the first name of Mrs. Apgar?"

"I've got Lusky right here, let me ask him." After a few seconds of metallic buzzing Hough came back on the line. "Claudia," he reported. "Why?"

"Word games, Sergeant. Suppose Robin Apgar didn't think he'd live long enough to write out the full first name of his wife? He might even have been afraid that if he died before completing the name Claudia, he might be throwing suspicion on someone completely innocent—someone named, oh, Clark Kent or something. So he did not even begin to write the name Claudia. Instead he started to set down a word game that would point unerringly to her. M 8. Mate. Wife. See? But he died before he could complete the 8, so it looks like an S!

"And not only does the dying message, properly interpreted, point to Claudia Apgar, but something else does, too. Didn't you wonder why Visitor Number Three, Elaine Gomulka, found Apgar's front door locked, and Mr. White, Visitor Number Four, found it *un*locked? If we suppose an extra visitor between them—a visitor unreported by Lusky, who no doubt sees a golden chance to blackmail his client later—the discrepancy clears up beautifully!"

There was a half minute's silence from the other end of the line, then Hough cleared his throat apologetically. "Uhhh . . . maybe you've got some other suggestion I could try, Professor? Gee, that one sounds sorta weak to me. I mean, Mrs. Apgar is the one person who knew the house was being watched. Would she have killed her husband knowing Lusky had the place under surveillance?

"Then again, how do you figure that if the message really means M 8 or mate that it points just to Mrs. A? I told you Apgar led a swinging life, Professor. We found a little black book full of enough female names to . . . Well, it just

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seems to me that M 8 or mate might mean any dame he ever shacked up with, and that's a hell of a way to tell us poor cops who clobbered him.

"And another thing. If Apgar was trying to make an 8 and died in the middle, I'd sort of expect the pen line to trail off down the page, but if you'll come down and look at it you'll see it's a clean break. No, Professor, I'll lay you odds he'd finished what he was writing. He meant that S to be an S, not an 8 or anything else. M S. I hope you can maybe give us another lead. Can you come down to Headquarters tonight?"

"Okay, Sergeant, how about seven o'clock? . . . See you then. 'Bye."

Mensing hung up, planted his elbows on the desk, lowered his chin into the nest of his joined palms and stared down at the litter in front of him—at the Federal Jurisdiction papers spread out fanwise with their bottom corners touching the far end of the desk, like the discarded poker hand of an opposing player.

It was a full ten minutes before he realized that the papers on his desk held the answer.

He reached over and picked up the student research paper at one end and without reversing it scooped up the phone and called Headquarters. After several minutes of bureaucratic delay he was given Apgar's unlisted number so that he might contact Sergeant Hough. He dialed again and told the sergeant what lead to follow and asked Hough to call back when he had checked it out.

"Don't hang up, Professor," Hough told him. "I can tell you already you're right. A couple minutes after we finished talking the first time my men found the bloody gloves the killer used. They'd been thrown into the ravine behind the house and we traced them with one call to the clothing store. The killer confessed as soon as we told him about the gloves.

"Seems he'd been juggling the books and siphoning off a lot of Apgar's money. Apgar was getting suspicious, so he got frightened and disposed of Apgar. Once we knew who did it, the MS thing was easy. But how did you work it out?"

"Dying men don't usually leave complex messages as clues," Mensing pontificated, forgetting how blithely he had flouted his own maxim within the past hour. "I just sat here looking at one of my female students' term papers on the opposite side of my desk. She had put an MS in front of her name, as I told you most liber-

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ated women law students do nowadays."

Turning the paper around, Mensing saw that it was Gael Irwin's, and he wondered how she would take the news that she had helped solve a murder, and the murder of a male chauvinist at that.

"That's when I saw what I'd missed before—that Apgar was trying to name his business manager, Sam White. Apgar wrote the initials S W, but you were so uptight over the Women's Lib angle that you read the message upside down without knowing it!"

"Q"

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THE INELEGANT CONSPIRACY

by MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD

I was six years old when my father was assassinated.

I wasn't there, of course; candidates don't take six-year-olds on their campaign tours. But 69 years later I still remember my mother's return home, lovely but subdued, and how she told me gently that daddy wouldn't ever be back again. I couldn't understand very well, but I knew there was more reason than ever to be proud of being Senator Vandervill's only child. All I own now from those days is their photograph—daddy tall and slim, mummy as beautiful as I remember her. On the back someone has written: *Blanche and Hilbert on their wedding day.*

A year later I was somebody else's stepson. And Rick Magill had been hanged.

When I grew old enough to know what it was all about, I read everything I could find. Some writers said Magill was a nut inspired by hatred of daddy's politics; some believed he was only the hired tool of a deep-dyed sinister conspiracy.

Naturally, I haven't spent all my long life in an attempt to find out the truth; I've made my way in a very different field from my father's. I'm a

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husband, a father, a grandfather, and just recently a great-grandfather. But somewhere in the back of my head I have always been nagged by the mystery of my father's murder, and have persisted in trying to find out what really happened, and why. It wasn't till a year ago that I succeeded. Now I have discovered the facts of what is today, except to me and one other person, only a historical event. No one else will ever know those facts until I have been dead for 50 years.

I said that from the age of seven I was somebody's stepson. Correction: I was *Somebody's* stepson.

Neil Gante—he and my mother are long since dead—was one of the richest men in America, and immensely powerful in both economic and political affairs. I was old enough to remember well my father's charm and kindness and liberal outlook; the pater, as Gante taught me to call him (I even took his name in childhood, though he never adopted me formally), was dour and harsh and extravagantly right-wing. But he was generous with money, and I grew up in circumstances far beyond those of my own father.

Gante put me through college and law school; after my mother died he never remarried; when he too died he left me a very sizable legacy. Which was good of him: he never approved of the kind of cases I took or my attitude in general. "A criminal lawyer is nothing better than an adjunct to criminals," he used to snap.

There is one disadvantage about being the son of a famous man—even a man who died before most of us were born: you are always in the public eye, always Senator Vandervill's only child. After I took my own name back, I couldn't make a move publicly without some newspaper reporter or TV commentator recalling our family past. Every time I won a case—or lost one, for that matter—the old story came up. So anything I could do in the way of investigating had to be done *sub rosa*, for fear of reawakening a lot of ugly rumors that are best left where they fell nearly 70 years ago.

I'm still working, I may add. I may be 75, but as long as I can talk and use my brain I have no trouble finding clients.

This man walked into my office without phoning for an appointment. Miss Delaney, my secretary for the past 20 years, told him as usual that I was busy (which, in fact, I was) and couldn't see him. He just sat down and said, "I'll wait." "You might have to wait all

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afternoon," she told him, "and tomorrow he has to be in court all day." "I'll wait," was all the man answered.

When my client went out the other door, Miss Delaney slipped in and reported. The man was still there, "waiting."

"A kook?" I asked.

"I don't think so. He seems very calm—just determined. Highly respectable-looking—dark suit, navy blue tie, glasses, gray pompadour."

"All right," I said, interested. "Show him in. I'll give him ten minutes. When I press the button, come in and tell me I'm wanted in Judge Gridley's chambers right away."

He stayed two hours. I had no lunch. I barely made my first appointment that afternoon.

The introduction was startling.

"Mr. Vandervill?" he began. "My name is Magill, Benjamin Magill. My father, Rick Magill, was hanged in a Federal prison for killing your father."

I just stared at him, my mouth open.

"It was a long time ago," he said quietly. "It is of interest now, I suppose, only to the historians and to you and me. You have children?"

I nodded.

"My late wife and I never had any. So let's say it's of interest only to you and your descendants and me—and to the historians. Except that I don't feel like letting them in on it. Let them do their own research." He paused. "I was two years old when my father died. I don't remember him."

"I was six. I remember mine very well." I heard the asperity in my tone.

"Yes. Well, I suppose you think I'm trying to prove that my father was innocent. He wasn't—he fired the shot that killed the Senator. The question is, who was behind him?"

"The conspiracy theory was discredited a long time ago. It has been abandoned."

"Then it must be revived," he said sardonically. "For I have the proof of it."

He reached into an inside pocket and brought out a long manila envelope. It was sealed with wax.

"I must first explain about this," he went on. "The circumstances under which I acquired it made me certain that it deals with the assassination. If it were merely to reiterate the orthodox account there would be no point in its having been given to me.

"I am, or I was—I retired five years ago—a chemical engineer. I came up the hard way—scholarships, dishwashing in the college dormitory kitchen, sum-

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mer manual labor, that sort of thing."

My nerves were beginning to fray.

"That's not my fault," I said.

"I didn't mean to imply it was. I'm only trying to explain why I never had the time or energy to brood over our family tragedy. My mother—like you, I'm an only child; they'd been married less than three years—was so deeply ashamed that she took back her maiden name when she became a typist again. I was known by her maiden name until I was fourteen. Then when I entered high school I told her I wasn't going to live any more under false pretenses; I'd been born Benjamin Magill and I was going to stay that way."

Despite my revulsion I was becoming fascinated.

"Did the other kids make it hard for you?" I asked.

"Not very. By that time most people had forgotten. Besides, there are plenty of people named Magill. Once in a while somebody would jeer at me as an assassin, but I never answered back. I'd have been worse off, of course, if my name had been Guiteau or Czolgosz or Sirhan."

"The envelope," I suggested.

"Oh, yes. Two weeks ago I had a call from an old acquaintance who is a lawyer, like you. Perhaps you know him—Harrison Crump."

I nodded. Who didn't know Harrison Crump? A big corporation attorney, with a lot of conservative political appointments—not "an adjunct to criminals" like me.

Magill seemed to read my mind. He smiled.

"Apparently," he said, "just once at least he took on a criminal case. Of course it was an embezzlement in high places, and the embezzler came from his own world. Incidentally, he lost the case, and the man died in prison—knifed by a fellow convict.

"When that happened, Crump told me, his client, knowing he was going to die of his wounds, asked the warden to send Crump an envelope, which had been among the possessions taken from him when he entered prison."

"And the warden gave it to Crump without having it opened and read?" I was incredulous.

"The warden is beholden to Crump. One makes concessions for a man like him. The first I heard about all this was when Crump phoned me. Inside the envelope he had found another —this one."

Magill held it out to me. On it, in an unfamiliar hand, was

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written: *Mr. Crump. After my burial deliver this unopened to Benjamin Magill.* It was signed: *Eldon Gough.* Whether he knew that Crump and Magill were acquainted, I have no idea. In any event I am now bringing it to you. We'll open it and read it together."

"Why?"

"Because, obviously, it belongs to us both. I never heard of the dead man—Eldon Gough. Did you?"

"Never. I may have read about Crump's case in the papers, but if so I've forgotten it."

"Same here. So the only possible reason Gough could want me to have this is that it has some connection with the assassination of your father. That being so, I feel obligated to share it with you."

A very righteous son of a murderer, I thought wryly. Maybe he took after his mother. But all I said was, "I thought you claimed you knew your father was guilty?"

"I have always thought that, and that he committed the crime alone. Perhaps this will change my mind. Shall we open it?"

I held up a sharp letter opener.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Let's consider first what we should do about it."

"You mean, it might be a confession of conspiracy? I doubt it. If a man like this embezzler had been mixed up in anything like that, he'd never admit it, dead or alive."

"All right," I said, "let's see."

He took the opener, cut the seal, and slit the envelope. It contained three large sheets of heavy paper, the top one white, the other two buff.

The first sheet was completely blank. On the second sheet, in minute letters, was printed in black ink the single word: *inelegant.* On the third, equally small and black, was an enigmatic: *eg-ex.*

We stared at each other.

"Is this some kind of crazy joke?" I muttered.

"It couldn't be. Even a lunatic doesn't play jokes after his death."

That wasn't what I had meant. I had wondered if he himself, the son of my father's assassin, could be perpetrating a cruel hoax on me. After a few moments he got the point, and he bristled.

"If you think I'd—" he sputtered.

It had been only a passing suspicion. I dismissed it and placated him with a gesture.

"Well, what shall we do about this?" I asked. "Obviously it's in code."

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"You're a lawyer," Magill said. "What do you suggest?"

"Leave it with me and I'll try to figure it out. When either of us has any ideas or information—if either of us ever does—we'll get together again and decide what to do next."

So on that agreement we parted—the son of the murderer of my father and I. It was a strange situation, as strange as the puzzling sheets of paper on my desk.

The first thing, of course, was to find out more about Eldon Gough. I set Miss Delaney at work in the Law Library and for my part began mulling over all the details of the assassination. At 75 one remembers better what happened when one was six than when one was 60.

Despite my earlier reading I had avoided dwelling on the tragedy—such morbidity would hardly have been encouraged by either my mother or her second husband. I can't recall their ever having mentioned my father's name. But now I started rereading all the books that have been written on the case. My father was an immensely popular Senator, and if he had lived I might now be the son of a former President of the United States..

My father always campaigned seriously for re-election, although there was never any doubt of his winning. On the fateful day he and my mother were in Cooperton, in the western part of the state. Our housekeeper, who was looking after me, ordered me to bed by eight o'clock, as usual. If reporters came to the house late that night, as I suppose they must have, no one told me. It was summer, and the housekeeper hastily took me to the lake where my father had a fishing cabin.

Until my mother came home the next day, I knew nothing of that dreadful moment when he stood on the platform in that hall, with my mother and his campaign manager sitting behind him, and made what was to be his last speech. He got a standing ovation. Rick Magill, in the audience, rose too, aimed his high-powered rifle straight at the smiling, triumphant candidate, and shot him through the heart.

Just as in the Kennedy and King assassinations, there were immediate rumors of a political conspiracy, with Magill as its deluded tool or its hired employee. But all investigations on that line came to nothing. It was decided that Rick Magill was a half-mad anti-Vandervill fanatic, and that was that. He was the product of a poor southern farm and an obscure

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office worker whom nobody ever heard of; he never explained his action.

Miss Delaney's research on the Gough case was more rewarding.

To begin with, there was an excellent reason why Crump should have served as Gough's attorney and, informally, as his executor: it was brought out in the trial that they were cousins. Crump was embarrassed by this, but got around it by alleging his strong family feelings, thus appealing to the more sentimental of the jurors.

Gough had been a stockbroker who had juggled with and appropriated funds entrusted to him for investment; unfortunately the same jurors who were moved by Crump's family feelings were also outraged by Gough's pilfering, so that the corporation lawyer's first venture in the defense of a criminal ended disastrously for his client.

But the mystery of the code remained unsolved; nothing bearing on my father's death was of any help. All the bizarre theories, the wild accusations, the vicious gossip (some of the last involving my mother, and some of it, very cautiously, hinting at Neil Gante) led nowhere.

Benjamin Magill called me occasionally, but only to report that he too was getting nowhere, but that he wasn't giving up.

I had played with the idea of consulting an expert cryptographer, but I decided that neither Magill nor I wanted any invasion of our privacy. The thing began to prey on my mind, not so much because I expected any real revelation (after all, it is ancient history by now and I'm not a historian) but because it annoyed me to have a puzzle I couldn't solve. Eldon Gough may have been a crook, but there was no doubt he was also the possessor of a shrewd and devious mind. That "message" must mean *something.*

And then one day my youngest grandson Luke, who at six (the same age I was when my father died) was already reading far beyond his years, came to me with the puzzle page of our Sunday paper. "Grandpa," he asked me, "what is a"—and he spelled it out—"a-n-a-g-r-a-m?"

In the act of explaining a sudden light burst on me. Probably my subconscious mind had been considering it all this time.

Inelegant. Neil Gante.

So Gough for some reason was accusing my stepfather of being involved in—responsible for?—my father's murder.

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Why? Well, one reason was all too likely. I had learned long ago what would have torn me apart when I was a boy. My beautiful mother was hard steel inside. Marriage was her career; from a background of poverty spurred by ambition she had raised herself first by marrying a Senator, then, when he was dead, a multimillionaire. I had no doubt that before she became Mrs. Vandervill there had been other tentative experiments which she had broken off for something better.

Was Eldon Gough one of these? In that case *eg-ex* might very well mean: I, Eldon Gough, was an ex-aspirant to the hand of the lovely Blanche.

But no, that was nonsense; Gough was of my generation, not of my parents! He was ten years younger than I. He could not have known my mother or Neil Gante.

What else could those letters mean?

The meaning of *inelegant* was unmistakable; so too, to my mind, was that of the blank white paper. Blanche. "Blanche" means "white," and it is close to "blank."

Nobody likes to reveal to another that his own mother had been a cold, self-seeking woman. Worse, if Gough was right, had she known beforehand? Was she in effect a murderess, she and Gante the real conspirators?

Only one person, from his own memories and private knowledge, would be able to help me solve this woeful mystery. But could I bring myself to tell my conclusions and suspicions to Benjamin Magill? I told myself I would only be washing my family's dirty linen in public after 69 years, and he might know no more than I if his father had ever been Neil Gante's tool. Let the whole thing die, I told myself; forget it.

Then Magill phoned me and asked anxiously if I had got anywhere with the "message." I changed my mind. "I think I've got it solved, or most of it," I said. "Come in and give me your opinion."

When I had finished telling him he looked uncomfortable. "I see," he said, "I'll have to tell you something about my father."

"I told you about my mother."

"Yes. He had no criminal record, you know that."

I nodded.

"But Gough had something on my father—ironically, the same kind of thing Gough had later done himself. When my father was a young man—I got this out of my mother before she died—he had worked for

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Gough as a bookkeeper. And Gough caught him falsifying his accounts. Gough fired him, but he didn't turn him in. My father made good the money he had stolen, and he never was in any sort of trouble after that."

"Until he killed my father."

"Until then. Gough had kept an eye on him. And when, as you seem to have ferreted out now, Gante needed a killer, Gough had one at his mercy. For my father it was either obey or have his past made public, which would have meant disaster. He was a weak, malleable man, but he had been reared on a farm in the Deep South, and had hunted and used a rifle since he was a boy. I imagine Gante even had him fooled into thinking he would be able to escape and get away with it."

"But where," I said, "does Gough come into this? Why should he have been doing Gante's dirty work for him?" And why, I asked myself, had Magill told me he had "never heard" of Gough?

"For money, of course, what else? Gante was used to buying people. Neither he nor Gough would soil his hands by actually shooting the Senator, but for enough money Gough would find him the ideal tool, and keep his mouth shut afterwards."

Then Magill said something so startling I couldn't believe I had understood him.

"You see," he said, "I am Crump, and I am Gough."

Was he insane? He repeated it.

"What on earth do you mean?"

"What I mean," said Rick Magill's son, "is that *I* wrote that message. It's true, just the way you figured it out, and I can prove it, but I wrote it. Harrison Crump never heard of it. He's Gough's cousin, all right, and he was Gough's lawyer, and Gough is dead. But I never met either of them."

"But—"

"Look, if I'd told you my conclusions myself, would you have believed me? You'd have thought I was making up a fairy tale to exonerate my father. So I worked it out this way, feeling sure you'd keep at it till you discovered the answer for yourself. I always intended to come clean, once you had.

"Because, you know, it happens to be all true. Neil Gante did pay Eldon Gough to get my father to kill yours. Whether your mother knew about it beforehand, I'm not sure. She must at least have suspected after it happened.

"And now I'll tell you the clincher." Magill looked utterly weary. "I told you Gough had

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the goods on my father. That's true enough. But Gante didn't just accept him on Gough's representation; he investigated first. He was a real cynic, your stepfather. He wanted your mother, but he wasn't a bit fooled by her."

"Please—" I said feebly. Magill smiled pityingly.

"Come off it, Vandervill. She was your mother, but she was also a greedy, self-centered woman, and you know it... Gante was too smart to let my father guess what he knew. He worked on him from the Blanche-angle. It was like the donkey and the carrot. Don't imagine that, when Gough brought Gante and my father together, Gante said, 'Gough and I will expose you if you don't get rid of Senator Vandervill for me.' My father would have known that already. But he was shaken to the depths when Gante said something like, 'I have my own good reasons for wanting him eliminated. And then you can get your first wife back.'"

My head was whirling. I felt sick. "Oh, no," I murmured.

"Oh, yes. I have the marriage certificate. My mother found it hidden away. She gave it to me on her deathbed and told me all she knew.

"Before your mother was married to your father, she was married to mine. I don't know if they were ever divorced —maybe we're both illegitimate. When she realized she had a chance to go up in the world by marrying a rising young politician, she left my father flat. If she couldn't get a divorce or annulment—the marriage had lasted only a few weeks—she could rely on him never to give the secret away. She was sure of my father's silence because he kept on carrying the torch, even after he'd married someone else and had a child—me. He and your mother had been childhood sweethearts, neighbors all their early lives.

"Gante made the discovery by having the official records searched. Naturally, he had it kept quiet after the arrest and conviction. He brainwashed my father until he was putty. 'If Vandervill were only dead, your sweetheart would come back to you—a girl never forgets her first lover'—that sort of thing. My mother and I were forgotten. My father honestly believed Gante would get him away clear and then he and your mother would be reunited.

"The kindest thing they could have done to my father was to hang him. At least he didn't have to see her marry Gante."

The whole thing was incredible. But it rang true to my

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memories of Neil Gante—and of my mother.

"My mother was always terribly reticent about her past," I admitted. "I knew she was a southerner, of course. But all she ever hinted at was a vague impression of wealth and aristocracy."

Benjamin Magill laughed.

"I think," I went on, "we'd better remain the only people on earth who know the truth about my father's assassination. What good would come of stirring up those muddy waters now? I won't even tell my wife or my children—it could only hurt them."

"You're right." He held out his hand. "We're both old men, Vandervill, and we won't be around many years more. The historians would rave, but let's keep our secret for what little time we have left. Someday somebody will get onto it. But meanwhile let's protect ourselves and your family from the prying of strangers."

We shook hands on it. There was just one thing left to untangle—that *eg-ex*. I told him of my erroneous conclusion.

"You mean I forgot to tell you that?" he said. "Look, I told you how my mother, out of shame, took back her maiden name. It was Elizabeth Gough."

"Then you really did know Gough? What was he, your nephew?"

Magill smiled sheepishly. "No relation whatever, and I didn't know him. I just had it against him, because of his name; we'd had enough disgrace in our family. That's why I pulled him into the plot."

I never saw Benjamin Magill again. Three months later he died of a heart attack.

It is only now, when the doctors tell me the unpleasant symptoms I've been experiencing mean something inoperable, that my conscience has troubled me and I have made up my mind to leave this account for posterity. But even so, I am guarding it. I have taken a leaf from Magill's book and shall deposit this in a sealed envelope with my executor. He has my instructions that it is not to be opened until 50 years after my death. By then my living descendants can no longer be injured; it will all be a curiosity of history. They will no longer be shocked, or even mind, that my mother was once married to the man who murdered my father.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Dr. Coffee *NOVELET* by

LAWRENCE G. BLOCHMAN

We've said it before, but it bears iteration and reiteration. Lawrence G. Blochman's Dr. Daniel Webster Coffee, chief pathologist and director of laboratories at Pasteur Hospital, Northbank, U.S.A., wears the hat (or crown, if you prefer) once worn by R. Austin Freeman's Dr. John Evelyn Thorndyke, M.D., F.R.C.P. Undoubtedly Dr. Coffee is the best medical detective on the current mystery scene . . .

Long ago a renowned pundit proclaimed certain "don'ts" of mystery technique and plotting. One was: twins are no longer acceptable as characters in a detective story—they've been overused into oblivion. Well, as we all know now, nothing is really forbidden (or impossible) in the plot of a mystery. Naturally, writers should not do what other writers have done before them; but if a writer can come up with a new twist, a new wrinkle on even the oldest chestnut of a plot idea, by all means he should use it. And that is what Mr. Blochman has done in this newest Dr. Coffee novelet—come up with something scientifically fresh and different about twins . . .

Rhoda Robbins loved identical twins. Which one did she decide to marry? And did the rejected twin take revenge? If so, which one? . . . so often the crucial question: Which one?

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DR. COFFEE AND THE OTHER TWIN

by LAWRENCE G. BLOCHMAN

One of the few people who could tell Fredric and Cedric Kensington apart was Rhoda Robbins, and unfortunately Rhoda was dead. Moreover, one of the Kensington boys—they were identical twins—was the most likely suspect of having murdered Rhoda. In fact, one of them was seen leaving the premises shortly before Rhoda's body was found, but which twin it was the witnesses were unable to say.

Rhoda Robbins had been the house guest of Mary Lamb, her roommate at Great Lakes University. The two girls had come down to Northbank to spend Easter vacation on the modest ten-acre estate of Mary's father. Rhoda had sole occupancy of the guesthouse overlooking the swimming pool (an arid leaf-blown expanse of blue tiles until May) so she would have whatever solitude she needed to decide which of the Kensington twins she wanted to marry. Rhoda had never seen the twins on their home grounds and her roommate thought she might gain perspective by looking at them from the vantage point of Château Lamb, dynastic seat of Northbank's banking baron.

The ninth day of Rhoda's Northbank sojourn proved to be her last. Her demise at an hour approaching midnight caught Lieutenant of Detectives Max Ritter standing at the refrigerator with his shirttail hanging out, pouring himself a cold beer for a nightcap. The desk sergeant who phoned made no apologies for disturbing Ritter's off-duty rest; he assumed that the Acting Chief of the Homicide Squad would want to make a personal appearance when the scene of the crime, if not the victim, was important enough to make Page One.

Ritter reached the Lamb guest cottage in the close wake of the squad cars and ambulance, and in a dead heat with the first of the technicians. Mary Lamb's hysterics had practically subsided. She had stopped screaming but she was still shaking and wasn't quite coherent.

The ambulance attendant an-

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swered Ritter's inquiring glance with a shake of his head. "No vital signs," he said. "She's not cold yet. In fact, she's hot. And she's got pinpoint pupils."

The lanky jug-eared police detective yawned as he made a preliminary survey of the corpus delicti and its surroundings. The late Rhoda Robbins sat on the floor alongside the hearth, leaning back against the bricks of the cold fireplace. The miniest of sky-blue miniskirts had slipped up to reveal a frilly undergarment and a monumental run in one leg of her panty-hose. Her legs were slightly parted, the unshod toes pointing to her satin slippers halfway across the room.

Ritter frowned as his gaze followed a winding trail of tarot cards scattered on the rug. Then he sniffed, and his head pivoted slowly as he tried to locate the source of the curiously appealing scent. Perched on the mantel was a red apple into which two lighted sticks of incense had been thrust, sending wisps of fragrance spiraling lazily upward.

Ritter watched the photographer recording the scene from all angles. At first glance the girl appeared to have fallen asleep. Closer inspection, however, told Ritter she was not relaxed, even in death. The muscles of her face were taut, her hands were clenched into tight fists, and her elbows made odd angles with her sides.

When the photographer had finished, the detective stooped for a closer look. He noted a tuft of blonde hair clutched in the dead girl's fingers. Producing a pair of tweezers and a cellophane envelope, he worked the hairs loose, carefully placed them in the envelope, and filed it in his evidence case, which was his coat pocket.

As he straightened up, he saw Mary Lamb watching him.

"This the babe that found the body?" he asked Detective Sergeant Brody, nodding toward the girl.

Brody nodded back. "Says her name's Mary Lamb."

"Blondie, tell me what you just told the sergeant."

"Oh, no! Again?"

"*And* again. And maybe still again. When did you last see this gal alive?"

"Right after dinner," said Mary Lamb. "Rhoda was seeing the Kensington twins tonight, so—"

"Both together or one after the other?"

"Separately, I suppose. I don't know in what order. Anyhow, I went to the movies with a boy friend. We got home—oh, it must have been around eleven. I was just saying good night to my date on the front

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veranda when one of the twins came walking up the path from the guesthouse to our driveway. I shouted, 'Good night, Fredric or Cedric as the case may be,' and he waved and said 'Hi.' Then he got into his car and drove off."

"You didn't recognize which twin?"

"No. It was dark. I can't tell them apart even in broad daylight. I don't know how Rhoda does. Did."

"What about the car?"

"They both drive red MG Midgets."

"Don't tell me they use the same license-plate number!"

"Silly! I didn't notice."

"Go on."

"Well, when my date left I saw the light still on in the guesthouse, so I called Rhoda on the interphone. We often got together here for a rap session after dates, the way we do at college. Did. Naturally I wanted to hear all the poop on what she'd decided about the twins. The phone didn't answer. I thought maybe the line was out of order or she was running a bath or something, so I skipped down the path, rang the bell, and walked in. When I saw Rhoda sitting there on the floor like this I guess I screamed."

"Why scream? Don't you college kids always sit on the floor to protest against chairs or something? And there's no blood, no bullet hole, no sign of violence. She ain't even cold yet. Why'd you scream? How'd you know anything was wrong?"

"Well, like she looked funny. She didn't answer when I talked to her. I just knew she was dead."

"Wanta guess which twin saw her last?"

"I—I—" Mary Lamb smothered her face with her hands. When she stopped sobbing she said, "I wouldn't dare guess. Rhoda loved them both a little. She was really having a hard time deciding, even though she said she could, you know, tell them apart."

Lieutenant Ritter pushed his warped felt hat to the back of his head and exhaled with what may have been either a sound of disapproval, exasperation, or plain weariness. He had a long night ahead of him, and interviewing people after midnight was not one of his favorite activities. Usually when confronted with an apparently insoluble enigma, Ritter consulted his personal Delphic oracle and private medical examiner, Dr. Daniel Webster Coffee. As long as the Northbank Police Department did not have a well-equipped crime laboratory and the county coroner was more proficient in ward politics

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than in forensic medicine, Ritter would continue to take advantage of his friend, the chief pathologist and director of laboratories at Pasteur Hospital.

After four hours of sleep, a miserable breakfast of instant coffee (which he detested), canned grapefruit juice (which he abhorred) and home-burned rye toast, Max Ritter strolled into the pathology laboratories at Pasteur.

"Hi, Swami," he greeted Dr. Motilal Mookerji, the pink-turbaned Hindu resident pathologist.

"Salaam, leftenant," replied Dr. Mookerji. "More felonious huggermugger afoot this morning-time, no doubt?"

"No doubt," said the detective. He saluted the attractive dark-haired technologist who was preparing test tubes for a sedimentation test. "Hi, Beautiful. Where's the wizard?"

"Dr. Coffee's in Operating Room Three," Doris Hudson replied. "We have a frozen section this morning. Come back later?"

"I'll wait." The detective sauntered into Dr. Coffee's office, made a routine tour of the walls, solemnly examining the framed diplomas and testimonials he had seen hundreds of times, then lowered his lean hams into a chair behind the pathologist's cluttered desk.

Five minutes later Dr. Coffee returned to the laboratory wearing a pale green gown and a gauze mask hanging from one ear. He handed a glass receptacle to Doris Hudson who removed from it a snippet of tissue which she transferred to the stage of the freezing microtome. She opened a petcock and a glacial blast shrieked from the carbon dioxide tank, burying the specimen in snow. The knife of the microtome swung repeatedly.

Doris caught the hair-thin flakes one by one on a fingertip, floated them on a salt solution briefly, then immersed them in dye. Within minutes she had them mounted like violet petals on tiny glass oblongs.

Meanwhile Dr. Coffee had dislodged Max Ritter from his chair and was seated at his microscope. When Doris handed him the slides, he slipped them under the nose of the instrument, switched on the light, and directed the beam upward. After twisting the focusing knob for a few moments he said, "Doris, go to the door of O.R. Three and tell Dr. Green to forget about that radical resection. The tumor is benign. No doubt about it."

The pathologist then turned to Ritter. "Sorry to keep you

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waiting, Max," he said, "but a young wife is going to wake up happy to learn the good news. Now, what's on your mind this morning?"

"That homicide I phoned you about last night," Ritter said. "Will you do the autopsy?"

"Dammit, Max, why doesn't the County Board finally break down and vote the money to hire a coroner's pathologist?"

"This one ain't on the cuff, Doc. The coroner okayed the usual enormous pittance. Just see his name gets in the papers."

"All right then. Tell me the girl's name again."

"Rhoda Robbins. I'd swear it's homicide, but officially cause of death is unknown."

"The perpetrator is also unknown?"

"Well, yes and no."

"Max, you talk like a politician. Level with me."

"I mean he's twins. At least in my book."

"Monozygotic?"

"Translate, Doc. Remember I'm just a high school dropout."

"Identical or fraternal twins?"

"Must be identical—nobody can tell 'em apart. Which brings me to the point. What can you do with hairs, Doc?"

"Let's narrow your question, Max. I can tell you if the hair is animal or human. I can guess at the owner's race. I can tell roughly which part of the body it comes from, and perhaps the sex of the original owner. Will that help?"

"You can't tell which twin it comes from?"

"Identical twins? No. Practically impossible."

"But not open-and-shut impossible?"

"Oh, if certain lucky external or superimposed factors should turn up I might hazard a guess, but testimony of that kind won't stand up in court. It never has."

Ritter fumbled in his pocket and brought forth a cellophane envelope. Dr. Coffee smiled with gratified amusement that his lectures to Max on the handling of physical evidence were beginning to bear fruit. Ritter used to store his clues in old dog-eared envelopes brought up from some hidden recesses of his person.

"I'm leaving this with you anyhow," the detective said. "Do what you can."

The pathologist held the cellophane envelope up to the light and counted about a dozen pale blonde hairs five or six inches long. He said, "I assume these came from the head of your most likely suspect."

"The deceased had them grabbed in her dead fingers."

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Dr. Coffee opened a drawer of his desk and dropped in the evidence.

"Look, Max," he said. "I have a busy morning ahead. Another biopsy's coming up, my weekly rundown of current cases with the interns and resident is scheduled for eleven, and I still have some of Wednesday's surgicals to read. But your case fascinates me. Can we meet for lunch at Raoul's and talk about it? Say, one o'clock?"

"More wine, messieurs?" asked Raoul, the red-faced Norman proprietor of the second-floor restaurant on the wrong side of the tracks. With a sweep of his napkin he brushed the flakes of French-bread crust from the red-checked tablecloth, then lifted the plates that had contained a savory *civet de lapin*—rabbit stewed in red wine with onions and spices.

"Thanks, Raoul," said Dr. Coffee, "but I'll have just a demitasse dripped and some Armagnac. Okay with you, Max?"

The detective nodded. Dr. Coffee leaned back in his chair feeling quite contented, not only because he had enjoyed the *civet* (his wife refused to cook rabbit at home because it reminded her of cat) but because he was intrigued by the problem presented by the death of Rhoda Robbins. He was extremely doubtful that forensic medicine could help determine which of the Kensington twins —if either—was guilty of the crime. He wasn't even sure there was a crime and wouldn't be until after the autopsy, but he was happy to find himself involved in the age-old controversy: which was the dominant factor in the definitive formation of man's character—heredity or environment? Or as Anthropologist Boaz put it, which is paramount, nature or nurture?

As Ritter had explained, Fredric and Cedric Kensington were genetically (and therefore physically) identical, but they had spent some of their formative years in surroundings that differed not only geographically but culturally. Even their emotional ambience was different for that period. If the "criminal type" theory of the early writings by the Italian criminologist Lombroso held true, the twins would be equally capable of murder. However, even Lombroso in his later years would have agreed that acquired characteristics might make Cedric more apt to kill than Fredric, or vice versa.

"You seem to be pretty sure that those hairs you gave me will turn out to belong to Fredric Kensington," Dr. Coffee said to Ritter. "Why?"

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"Like I said, Fredric leaves Northbank on the midnight plane for Toledo," the detective replied, "less than an hour after the body of Rhoda Robbins turned up."

"I hear they've got newspapers in Toledo. And if not, it's been on radio and teevee all day that we're looking for him."

Raoul set down the coffee and brandy.

"Thanks, Raoul," the pathologist said without looking up. "You must have other reasons, Max, the way you talk."

"Maybe. Of course, so far I've only talked to Cedric, but he didn't impress me as the caveman type. I know, I know, Doc, you don't go along with the old Lombroso born-to-kill stuff. But these two guys don't act alike, from what people tell, even if they do look alike. They *play* at look-alikes. They love to fool people. When they first came to college, this Lamb dame tells me, one has a beard and the other just a coupla commas for a mustache. One wears Levis and the other Brooks Brothers outfits. Now they wear the same clothes, same color shirts and ties, go to the same barber, drive the same kind of car, and try to make the same gals."

"What do they do different then, Max?"

"Well, Fredric's more the action type. He's intercollegiate middleweight boxing champ. He plays football. As a kid he went fishing and hunting with his old man. This Cedric is the mental type. He's editor of the college paper. He writes poetry. He collects cookbooks. He bakes popovers and French pastry. The dead babe's roommate told me the other day he once brought over a cake he baked with his own hands, for God's sake!"

"Do the twins live together?" Dr. Coffee sipped his brandy. Ritter had already finished his at one gulp.

"Negative," said the detective. "Not at college and not here. They think it's fun to turn up unexpectedly at places where people don't know which one it is. Fredric lives with his old man when he's in Northbank. Cedric has a little dough inherited from his mother, so he has his own place—an arty one-room pad in an unrenewable urban ruin on the riverfront."

During lunch Ritter had told Dr. Coffee what he had been able to learn about the Kensington twins They had been separated for seven years before they became reunited at Great Lakes University and began working seriously at the business of being twins. When their parents' marriage broke up,

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Fredric and Cedric were just eleven. It had been a more or less friendly separation: George and Evelyn Kensington had come to the conclusion that each wanted something different from life.

George Kensington was a brilliant lawyer—even Evelyn had agreed; but he cared nothing about making money. He was always taking grubby little Legal Aid Society cases, or volunteering to be a friend of the court in some Civil Liberties Union defense of a poor southern black lost in the urban jungle of the North. Evelyn on the other hand had been born to money, considered it a necessity for the enjoyment and appreciation of the finer things in life, and she intended to use her own for a creative career. She took Cedric with her when she went to live in Paris, London, and New York to compose string quartets and marry a highly successful (and wealthy) surgeon who was a patron of the arts.

Dr. Coffee reached across the table for a color photo of Rhoda Robbins that Ritter had taken from Cedric Kensington's pad. A duplicate, Ritter said, was perched on Fredric's bureau. The three-quarters' length picture portrayed a small-boned well-endowed woman in her twenties. Her smoky blue eyes were in startling contrast to her midnight-dark hair which fell to her shoulders. Her long eyelashes appeared not to have come from a box, but the pathologist would be able to check that later. He shook his head as he handed the picture back to the detective. What a waste of youth, vitality, and sheer animal charm!

"What did Cedric the mental one have to say about her?" Dr. Coffee asked.

"He and his brother are both nuts about her," Ritter said. "So are half a dozen other big shots on the campus. Cedric said she majors in men, but she finds matrimony too restricting."

The Kensington twins, however, had given her a joint ultimatum. After all, this was their senior year. She had promised to make up her mind by the end of the Easter vacation. The twins had bought a ring jointly, leaving it at the jeweler's to be claimed by the lucky suitor. She had died, Cedric told Ritter, without announcing her decision.

Rhoda was alive, Cedric swore, when he had last seen her at about ten o'clock the previous night. He had no idea when his brother Fredric had seen her last.

"Does Cedric think Rhoda

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was trying to get help in making her decision by consulting those tarot cards you were telling me about?"

"Both Cedric and Mary Lamb say Rhoda was kind of a kook about this screwy mod stuff—tarot, astrology, Zen, numerology, you name it. Look, Doc, I gotta get on my horse. Duty calls. Or anyhow whispers."

"Okay, Max. I'll get down to my homework later this afternoon. When I've finished, I'd like to meet Cedric Kensington at his pad. Can do?"

"Why not? Say, Doc, maybe I ought to warn you. You may get Papa Kensington in your hair soon. He's been sniffing around our shop trying to pick up a scent so he can yell 'police brutality.' I told him we're not even sure Rhoda Robbins was murdered till you give the word."

When Dr. Coffee walked into his laboratory after lunch, Dr. Mookerji signaled frantically from his workbench with a large pair of shears with which he had been cutting tissue.

"World's most obstinate barrister is currently waiting inside inner sanctum," said the Hindu in a stage whisper. He handed the pathologist a calling card. "Did utmost to resist but said barrister succeeded in overcoming efforts to exclude entry."

Dr. Coffee glanced at the card. "I was rather expecting him," he said. He took off his street coat, hung it up, and slipped into a white jacket before entering his office.

George Kensington rose and introduced himself. He was a tall well-built man with an unpressed tweedy air about him. His top-heavy face, broad forehead tapering to a fighting chin, was surmounted by slicked-back hair of pale gold. There was just a sprinkling of gray in his mid-cheek sideburns.

"I assume," said Dr. Coffee, "that you are the father of the Kensington twins. Are you also representing them as their attorney?"

"When or if they are charged with anything," Kensington said, advancing his lower jaw almost a full inch, "I shall certainly defend them. Meanwhile I'd simply like to insure myself that there is no skulduggery, no creation of false evidence against my boys."

"Sit down, Mr. Kensington," said Dr. Coffee, "and take the chip off your shoulder. Who told you there was skulduggery afoot?"

Kensington sat down brusquely on the edge of a chair. "I happen to know that you have some hair in your possession

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that you're going to try to prove came from the head of one of the Kensington twins."

"Did the police tell you that?"

"A person who saw a police detective remove some hair from the dead fingers of Rhoda Robbins informed me. The police have referred all inquiries to you. I understand you have made a post-mortem examination. What did you find?"

"I won't have the gross autopsy findings until tonight. The microscopic and chemical findings—which I suspect may be extremely important in this case—may not be known for a week."

The lawyer made a gesture of impatience. "Have you considered, Doctor, that Miss Robbins may have been a cardiac case?"

"I don't have to speculate. If she was a cardiac case I will be able to say so with certainty this evening."

Kensington stood up and leaned across the desk. He shook a forefinger at Dr. Coffee as if addressing a jury. "If you expect to introduce that hair as factual evidence," he said, raising his voice, "you're in for a surprise. No court in this country will let you swear that X hair came from Y's head. Your microscope can tell you no more than the ratio of the diameter of the shaft to the medulla—"

"Please, Mr. Kensington, don't start lecturing me on forensic pathology!" Dr. Coffee felt a flush creeping into his cheeks. Determined not to lose his usual cool, he leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath. "There are other factors to be learned about hair from microscopic examination. In fact, Lieutenant Ritter is checking on some of them now."

"For instance?"

"I won't disclose any that you might manipulate, but I'll give you an example you can't use to advantage. One of your sons—Cedric, I believe—boasts he is a first-rate pastry chef. If the hairs in my possession should under the microscope show particles of flour dust clinging to them—"

"Come now, Doctor, are you really going to give us the Sherlock Holmes routine?" Kensington smiled sarcastically.

Again Dr. Coffee took a deep breath. "Look, Counselor," he said, "neither of your sons has been arrested or even accused. But has it ever occurred to you that one of them might really have killed Rhoda Robbins?"

Kensington's expression changed. His lips straightened into a grim line. "I might have killed her myself," he said.

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"She was an evil creature, a no-good rattlepate whose only aim in life was to drive men crazy."

"Not exactly a capital crime, Counselor."

"She was a Jezebel, a bald-faced liar, a—"

"But both the twins wanted to marry her."

"Mad, mad. She was a complete phony, even her name. Her father has an unpronounceable foreign name. He's serving time in the state pen for embezzlement. But even if one of the twins killed her, you'll never be able to identify him beyond a reasonable doubt. Nobody can tell them apart."

"Can you?"

"When they're not working at their guess-who act, yes. The years they spent apart during their adolescence shows through when they're not play-acting."

"Rhoda Robbins claimed she could tell them apart. Was that one of her pathological lies?"

"Maybe not." Kensington was smiling to himself. "If she went to bed with both of them she might know which was which. One of the twins wasn't circumcised."

Dr. Coffee said nothing.

"Cedric. He's the younger by fifteen minutes and his mother's pet. She couldn't bear the idea of his being mutilated."

Kensington got up suddenly and walked to the window. He continued talking but kept his back to Dr. Coffee as though to hide a change of expression.

"I don't dare wonder how he would have turned out if he had lived with her any longer," he said.

"How did she happen to let him go?" the pathologist asked.

"She didn't really. She killed herself."

"Does Lieutenant Ritter know that?"

"Nobody does." Kensington turned to face Dr. Coffee. His face was expressionless. "The death certificate, signed by her second husband, said she died of cardiac arrest, which is technically true. When the heart stops, death ensues, even when the stoppage is caused by some morphine derivative. You see, my wife found out that her string quartet, which she thought had been commissioned by a music foundation and which was roundly panned when it was played, was actually subsidized by her second husband . . . well, I must be going."

"Just a moment, Mr. Kensington. Before you leave I'd like you to let Miss Hudson have a few hairs for comparison. She'll try to take them so they won't show, won't you, Doris?"

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Dr. Coffee watched in silent amusement while Kensington submitted reluctantly to painless minor depilation at the hands of the comely dark-eyed technologist.

When he had gone, Dr. Coffee took Max Ritter's cellophane envelope from his drawer and summoned Doris to his office.

"Doris," he said, "I want you to mount longitudinal sections of one or two strands of this hair and the sample you just took from our visitor. I am particularly interested in the roots and the distal ends. Then I want you to mount cross-sections that I can examine with the micrometric eyepiece tomorrow. I expect to get some more samples for comparison tonight."

An hour later, before going down to the mortuary in the basement with Dr. Mookerji, the pathologist phoned Lieutenant Ritter.

"Max, I've had a quick look at that hair you brought me," he said, "and I think I may have a lead for you. The man whose head it came from had his hair cut recently, probably yesterday, and almost certainly within the last forty-eight hours."

"It still smells of bay rum?"

Dr. Coffee chuckled. "The tips have a sharp silhouette under the microscope. This clean line begins to change as soon as one day later."

"What about the autopsy, Doc?"

"I'm on my way down there now. Can you pick me up at home tonight at about eight? I promised my wife I'd come home for dinner. Seems we have a cousin in town from New York."

When Dr. Coffee and Dr. Mookerji returned to the laboratory with pertinent parts of the vital organs formerly belonging to the late Rhoda Robbins, the pathologist gave instructions to his technologist.

"Make routine sections of the usual tissue, Doris," he said, "except for the brain. You'll note that I already sectioned the brain horizontally to confirm my suspicions, but after fixation I'll want special sections from the pons and the floor of the fourth ventricle. Dr. Mookerji will show you. And make up one set with osmic acid stain just in case I've misinterpreted the gross findings."

As Lieutenant Ritter opened the door of the police car for Dr. Coffee that evening he said. "Bad news, Doc. Your haircut clue is a dud. Fredric and Cedric go to the same barber—pardon me, hair stylist, Mr

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Dagobert, by appointment only. They both got a haircut yesterday afternoon within half an hour of each other. Incidentally, they both have dandruff . . . Does the postmortem show we got a murder?"

"You know I don't like to pontificate until I've seen the microscopic sections, Max," the pathologist said, "but from the gross examination I'd say we do have a homicide, even if we can't prove it's murder. From the ambulance intern's description of the immediate post-mortem symptoms—the pinpoint pupils, the unusual temperature of the body—I suspected a pontine or ventricular hemorrhage—"

"Now, now, Doc!" Ritter stopped for a red light.

"The microscope will show bleeding into a brain area no bigger than a peanut. I'm sure I'll find that this series of tiny hemorrhages has torn nerve fibers and destroyed nerve cells that control such vital functions as breathing and the heart beat."

"So her skull was cracked?" The light turned green.

"No, there was no fracture. There doesn't have to be when the brain gets badly shaken up, and the girl's head was obviously banged against the bricks of the fireplace. There was a bruise at the back of her head and traces of brickdust in her hair . . . Incidentally, what color is Mary Lamb's hair?"

"Blonde. What else?"

"You'd better get me a sample of her golden tresses, then. No word of the other twin?"

"Nope."

Ritter turned the car into the rutty road that paralleled the riverfront which, because it lay below the highwater mark whenever the spring floods engaged in their quinquennial exaggeration, had become what Ritter called "an unrenewable urban ruin." The ramshackle buildings that lined the narrow street might have been transplanted from Provincetown or Greenwich Village—rows of shoddy self-consciously arty crafts shops, paperback bookstores full of beads, beards, bosom-length hair, fringes, and psychedelic art. Antiwar posters decorated outer walls and antiwar protestors squatted in doorways.

Cedric Kensington's domicile was located above a gay bar and lounge with a heterogeneous if not heterosexual clientele.

When the pathologist and the detective paused on the second-floor landing, the muted staccato of a typewriter in counterpoint to the strains of *The Pines of Rome* was coming through the door. Ritter

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knocked. The typewriter stopped and the door opened.

Cedric Kensington was a reasonable facsimile of his father, Dr. Coffee mused—tall, well-built, with the same top-heavy triangular face and pale gold mane. He was wearing a purple dressing gown and green carpet slippers.

"Hello, Lieutenant. Come in."

"This is Dr. Coffee. We're here on business. I don't have a search warrant, so you don't have to let us in. In fact, you'll have to invite us."

"You know you're both welcome," said Cedric. "I told you last night I'd do anything I could to cooperate. Please come in." Cedric threw the door open wider.

Dr. Coffee glanced around the sparsely furnished room. There were three prints on the wall, all of approximately the same period and all of the same subject—a nude bathing in a tub—by Lautrec, Picasso, and Charles Camoin. The typewriter was a portable on a card table, and there were two straight chairs, an easy chair, and a worn love seat.

Cedric stopped in front of his hi-fi, the most expensive-looking piece of furniture in the room. "Shall I turn this down?" he asked Dr. Coffee. "If it bothers you—"

"Not at all," said the pathologist, "but aren't you afraid of being disowned by your generation? Respighi has been dead almost forty years."

Cedric gave a quick nervous smile. "Can't a man be under thirty and still not belong to the cult of the ugly? I admire the beautiful. That's why I loved poor Rhoda, I guess. Are you arresting me?"

"No hurry," said Ritter. "Unless you want to confess."

"Let's all sit down," Cedric said. "Confess to what? I don't even know Rhoda's dead, except from what you tell me. And why would I kill the girl I love?"

"I'm not going to quote Oscar Wilde," said Dr. Coffee. "I'm sure Lieutenant Ritter can suggest many reasons."

"For one, she turned you down," said Ritter.

"On the contrary. She agreed to marry me. She wanted to delay the announcement for a week, though, to give her a chance to let my brother Fredric down gently."

"You think Fredric found out anyhow?"

"I haven't heard from him. But it's possible, isn't it, that the Kensington twin seen leaving the premises just before the body was found last night was Fredric?"

"That's what the doc here

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/ants to find out," said Ritter. Are you giving us a swatch of our hair or do we have to scalp ou?"

Cedric laughed. He had /hite, even teeth.

He seemed remarkably ood-humored, Dr. Coffee ıused, for a man who had just ɔst his fiancée, yet he was not ɔmpletely at ease. His move- ıents were jerky, his speech ow and studied, his eyelids vitchy. A high-strung lad, ap- arently.

"I'm going to take this hair y the roots," said Dr. Coffee ɔkingly. "Do you want a local ıesthetic?"

"I'd rather have a general." edric smiled with his lips but ɔt with his eyes. "Will you ıaracters do me a favor? Let ıe make the arrangements for hoda's burial. No funeral, ıough. She didn't believe in ıything and she has no fam- y."

"I understand she has a fath- ," said Dr. Coffee.

"Purely putative," said Ced- ɔ. "She disinherited him years ɟo." He winced as he lost a rand of hair.

"Do you mind if I have a ok around your quarters?" ked Dr. Coffee as he carefully rapped the hair in cellophane.

"Be my guest."

The pathologist stepped into tiny kitchenette. The gas range was spotless. The shelves were well stocked with spices. A tape recorder acted as a bookend for a dozen cook- books. He tried a door next to a miniature sink. It was locked.

"And the bathroom, too?" he asked.

"Sure," said Cedric. "I do have indoor plumbing."

While the police car was climbing the slope away from the river Ritter asked, "Find anything in the medicine cabi- net, Doc?"

"Certainly." The pathologist took out a notebook, flipped it open and held it close to the dashboard lights as he read, "Toothpaste, shaving cream, safety razor, roll-on deodorant, aspirin, baking soda, mouth- wash, glycerine suppositories, Dander-oh-No scalp treatment, and two prescription items from the College Pharmacy in Academia. One was a large bot- tle of some oleaginous liquid and the other was a smaller bottle which evidently con- tained tablets of some kind. The smaller bottle was empty. I'll check the prescription num- bers with the pharmacy in the morning."

"What do you do with the hair you harvested tonight?"

"I can't do a thing, Max, until you get me comparison samples from the other twin

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and from the Lamb girl, too. Then I'll probably send the lot over to Northbank University for analysis."

"Can't the Swami or Doris Hudson do it in your own lab?"

"We don't have the equipment needed for a job like that, Max. There's a sophisticated automated process called flame-ionization gas chromatography that can break down the components of a hair and record quantities as minute as two-tenths of one microgram. That's one ten-billionth of an ounce."

Ritter puckered his lips in a silent whistle.

"Trouble with these ultra-sensitive instruments, Max, is that they're no better than the man who uses them. I had a professor in medical school who used to caution me when I used a microscope, 'low-power magnification, Coffee, and high-power cerebration.' Luckily there's a team of scientists over at Northbank U. who are up to the potential of their equipment. All the expensive and sophisticated gear they have over in the Chemistry Building wouldn't be worth thirty cents without Dr. Mitchell, professor of molecular chemistry, and his highly capable crew."

"You think they'll turn up something, Doc?"

"I hope so. If it's at all possible, Dr. Mitchell will match the hairs." Ritter changed gears as the car topped the brow of the hill and leveled off. "Max, do you think it's too late to call on Kensington Senior without a search warrant? I'd like to look through the other twin's medicine chest if Papa will let us in."

Surprisingly, Kensington Senior offered no objections and Dr. Coffee came away with another list. There were no prescription drugs in Fredric Kensington's bathroom, only the standard toothpaste, razor, shaving soap and lotion, and mouthwash.

Dr. Coffee had just gone to bed and was about to turn off the light when the telephone rang.

"Wake you, Doc?" asked Max Ritter's voice. "We've got news."

"Good or bad, Max?"

"Let's say, with possibilities. You know Brody? You always say he ain't exactly a mental giant, but he's bullheaded and he's my champ follow-througher. Well, Brody spent the evening going through the Lamb guesthouse again with a fine-tooth comb. This time he found stashed away in the fingers of a glove a guy's fraternity pin and a gold wedding ring. Inside the wedding ring there's

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two names, Rhoda and Pete—"

"Great stars!" Dr. Coffee interrupted. "Who's Pete?"

"That's what I asked myself," said Ritter. "So I called this frat house at Great Lakes and asked for Pete. Some guy said, 'You mean Pete Hyde?' and I said, 'Sure, is he there?' and the other guy said, 'No, he's in the infirmary. Somebody beat the hell out of him.' "

"Max, isn't this Pete Hyde the Great Lakes football star?"

"Right. When I hung up, I got this hunch to call the police station in Academia. It must be quite a slugger to put a six-foot two-hundred-pound fullback in the hospital. The fight could have attracted attention. Follow me, Doc?"

"I may be a little ahead of you, Max."

"Right. The Academia cops have got Fredric Kensington in jail. For assault and battery. They also charged him with second-degree arson."

"Arson!"

"Right. I ain't sure what he burned down, but I'll get the details tomorrow. I fly at the crack of dawn. I've got to change planes at Toledo, but I'll try to get back by tomorrow night. See you, Doc."

"Happy landings, Max. Don't forget to bring me back some of Fredric's hair."

Detective Sergeant Brody was waiting in the pathology laboratory when Dr. Coffee reached the hospital early next morning.

"Lieutenant Ritter told me to leave these with you," he said while the pathologist was getting into his working smock. "He says in case you want to make with the microscope."

Brody had followed Dr. Coffee across the laboratory and into his office. He deposited one large and one small plastic evidence case on the doctor's desk.

"Thanks, Sergeant. Take a seat." Dr. Coffee opened the smaller case first. It contained a plain gold wedding band and a Greek-letter fraternity pin, lozenge-shaped and rimmed with seed pearls. "I'll see if I can turn up something," he added as he opened the larger container. "Hey, what's this?" He riffled through a sheaf of typewritten pages.

"I dunno," said Brody, "but the lieutenant said I should bring it to you after we dusted it for prints. I found it in the victim's suitcase under her panty-hose and black lace nightgowns."

Dr. Coffee gave his concentrated attention to the typescript. It was apparently a thesis by a candidate for a master's degree at Great Lakes

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University, someone named Christopher Blett, who was seeking higher academic honors in history, political science, or foreign affairs. It was titled: *The Influence of Gastronomy on Nineteenth Century European Diplomacy.*

The pathologist smiled to himself. It was an interesting subject, if treated in the light of Peking duck, *mao tai,* and Twentieth Century television diplomacy, but not exactly original. Didn't everybody know how Metternich dominated the Congress of Vienna through the superlative cuisine of Austrian hostesses? Surely everyone knew that Nesselrode pudding was named for the Russian minister of foreign affairs in 1815. Everyone, perhaps, except the late Rhoda Robbins, to whom, according to the way she had been characterized, the post-Napoleonic peace of Europe might have been of minor interest.

"Who the hell is Christopher Blett?" Dr. Coffee asked Sergeant Brody.

"You've got me," Brody replied.

"Did you speak to Mary Lamb, the victim's hostess?"

"Oh, sure. She don't know. Some guy at Great Lakes U. is all she knows, she says."

"Okay, Sergeant. I'll talk about it to Lieutenant Ritter when he comes back tonight."

Brody left, with an appreciative glance at the decorative legs of Doris Hudson, perched on a tall stool before her workbench as she extricated parrafin blocks from a refrigerator tray.

Dr. Coffee was skipping through the dissertation of the master's candidate who believed that the naming of delicious new dishes after the delegates to the Congress of Vienna was responsible for the maintenance of comparative peace in Europe for 99 years when Dr. Mookerji waddled into his office to announce in a stage whisper, "Youngish blonde lady is awaiting without. Is requesting audience on behalf of Leftenant Ritter."

The pathologist smiled. "Show her in, Doctor."

Something about Mary Lamb raised Dr. Coffee's hackles the moment she stepped across the threshold. He tried to analyze his feelings. Was it her narrow face, her thin lips, the self-consciously superior manner with which she carried her blonde head, as though to say, "Look, I may be simply dressed but every stitch I wear proclaims money and my good taste." He told himself that he was getting needlessly emotional.

"That skinny cop told me

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ou wanted a sample of my ir," said Mary Lamb, tossing envelope to his desk. "I'm ary Lamb."

"Thank you, Miss Lamb, but n afraid we'll have to take our vn sample."

"I was hoping I could avoid ing disfigured."

"Miss Hudson will treat you ntly," said the pathologist. You won't be scalped. But fore you go out to be tor- red I'd like to ask a few uestions. Won't you sit own?"

Mary Lamb sat gingerly on e edge of a chair; the seat ight be swarming with a partic- larly virulent strain of staph- ococcus.

"Miss Lamb, who is Chris- pher Blett?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. ne of the cops asked the same uestion."

"Why would his master's esis on Metternich's gastro- omic diplomacy be found hid- en under Rhoda Robbins' un- erwear?"

"A very good question, Doc- or, but I can't answer it." Mary amb tried to laugh; the effort rned out to be a mirthless hicker.

"When were Rhoda Robbins nd Peter Hyde married?"

"Rhoda and Pete—? Don't ake me laugh."

"She had a wedding ring."

"Sure, why not? It looks better when a girl goes to a motel."

"And Hyde's fraternity pin."

"Rhoda collected frat pins. Didn't mean a thing."

Dr. Coffee thought: It might have meant a great deal to the Kensington twin who thought Rhoda was going to marry him. He said, "Thanks for coming by, Miss Lamb. Now let me introduce you to Doris Hudson."

When the girl had gone, Doris asked, "How do you want the hair mounted, Doctor?"

"Just give me an inch or two with the tips. Probably won't show anything. She looks as if she hasn't had a haircut in months," the pathologist replied.

While Doris was preparing Mary Lamb's hair for the microscope, Dr. Coffee suddenly realized that he had not done his follow-up homework on last night's research. He picked up the phone and told the switchboard operator, "Get me the College Pharmacy in Academia."

A few moments later he said, "This is Dr. Daniel Coffee at Pasteur Hospital in Northbank. I'd like to check on the following prescriptions you people have put up." And he read the numbers. While waiting he started opening the morning's mail,

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throwing away half of it. "Did you say phenothiazine? . . . I see. And the other one? . . . Why the devil would he need a prescription for that? . . . I see. What percentage? . . . Thank you very much. No, he doesn't need a refill. Goodbye."

Dr. Coffee hung up. When Doris Hudson came in with the hair tips mounted on slides, he was smiling smugly to himself. "Doris," he said, "I think we have a fifty-fifty chance of solving Max Ritter's problem within the next few days."

At noon Dr. Mookerji brought the early edition of the afternoon newspapers to the laboratory. Details of Fredric Kensington's arrest in Academia were on page one.

"Academia police are holding Fredric Kensington, Great Lakes University senior, on charges of arson and assault. Kensington, a resident of Northbank, is accused of setting fire to the Shetland Print Shop on the south side of the GLU campus, and of beating Peter Hyde into unconsciousness when he tried to interfere. Hyde is in the intensive care unit of Academia General Hospital suffering from possible concussion. An all-star fullback for the GLU Catamounts the past two seasons, he is also part owner of the Shetland Print Shop which was totally d stroyed before the fire depa ment got the blaze under co trol. Kensington would give r explanation for his actions. H father, George Kensingto Northbank attorney, is flying t Academia to undertake his d fense."

Dr. Coffee called Geor Kensington's office. His secr tary reported the lawyer h left for Academia that mornin

Max Ritter arrived at D Coffee's laboratory at nightfa

"The D.A. in Academia sa his arson charge takes prec dence," Ritter said. "He won release Fredric Kensington t me unless I serve him with murder warrant. Can we char Fredric with homicide, Doc?

"Not at this instant, Ma Maybe in a day or so. Did yo bring me some of Fredric hair?"

"Right here. No problem. H didn't object."

"You talked to him then?

"Right." Ritter nodde "But he didn't talk back."

"Did you ask him if Rhod Robbins was the cause of h beating up Pete Hyde?"

"He wouldn't talk abou Rhoda."

"Do the Academia polic have any theory about why h burned down the Shetland Prin Shop?"

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"Nope."

"I have a hunch that may be worth working on later," Dr. Coffee said. "I wish you had called me from Academia before you started home."

"I shared Flight Sixty-six with Papa Kensington coming home," the detective said.

"Did you talk to him?"

"Sure. We also shared a cab from the airfield. He tried to get bail for twin son Fredric on the arson charge, but the court said no dice as long as we've got a possible murder charge pending here."

"Well, let's get on with our hair business," Dr. Coffee said. 'Dr. Mookerji, do you have those sterile test tubes ready?"

"Ready, waiting, and all neatly labeled this morning-time," the Hindu resident replied.

"Max, give the hair to Dr. Mookerji and he'll see that it gets to Northbank University. Dr. Mitchell will be waiting at the Chemistry Building. He's been alerted."

"Let me take it over, Doctor," Doris Hudson volunteered. "I pass the Chemistry Building on my way home."

Dr. Coffee had kissed his wife, shed his coat, put on his slippers, and was in the pantry surveying his bottles, trying to decide whether he should make Manhattans or martinis before dinner. He heard the phone ringing and his wife answering.

"For you," his wife announced. "It's Dr. Mookerji."

Dr. Coffee took down both the Italian and French vermouth before taking the call in the foyer. "What's up, Doctor?" he asked.

"Grave contingency just now arising, Doctor Sahib," came an excited voice. "Am now repairing posthaste to emergency clinic at University Hospital. Am suggesting you do likewise."

"What happened?" Dr. Coffee gripped the phone tightly.

"Doris Hudson," the resident exclaimed. "Lady was slug-mugged in occipital region."

"Is she badly hurt?"

"Unable to ascertain. Therefore am interjecting self into case personally. Have likewise advised Leftenant Ritter of situation. Goodbye."

Dr. Coffee hung up, gave his wife a brief explanation, left the Manhattan-martini question unsettled, urged his superannuated Chevy into reluctant action, and took off for University Hospital.

He drove through the phalanx of reporters, police, and curious bystanders who had gathered outside the emergency entrance, parked in a space reserved for ambulances, and iden-

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tified himself to the intern on duty. He found that Ritter and Dr. Mookerji had preceded him.

"Where's Doris?" The question was addressed to anyone listening.

Dr. Mookerji nodded his turbaned head twice to the left.

Doris Hudson was in the process of raising herself to a sitting position on a cot in the corner. When she saw the pathologist she fell back and covered her face with her hands.

"I'm just a nitwit, a numskull, and a clumsy incompetent," she moaned. "Will you ever forgive me, Doctor?"

"Take it easy, Doris," Dr. Coffee said. "Are you badly hurt?"

"I'm just a little woozy. He knocked me down. I'm only groggy." She shook her head. "But he grabbed my bag."

"Were the hair specimens in it?"

"Yes."

"Any idea who it was?"

"No. He was waiting back of the shrubbery at the entrance to the Chemistry Building. He hit me from behind. I fell forward on the steps. I didn't see anything."

Dr. Mookerji, who had been making cabalistic signals with both hands from across the room, now approached the cot and whispered to Doris, "Kindly cease having regrets and guilt feelings. All is not lost." Straightening up, he confided to Dr. Coffee, "Have preserved duplicates of all suspected hairs in laboratory."

"You're a genius, Doctor!" Dr. Coffee beamed. "Then we'll start over. Max will furnish us with a police escort this time."

Doris Hudson was at her workbench when Dr. Coffee reached the laboratory next morning half an hour early.

"What's the meaning of this insubordination, Doris? I distinctly told you to stay home today."

"We have a terrific backlog, Doctor," Doris replied, "which is going to get bigger if I don't catch up. And besides, I don't even have a headache this morning. Do you think I'll get my handbag back?"

"I do. The mugger probably dropped it into a mailbox after he had extracted the hair specimens. The mailman will deliver it to you on payment of sufficient postage due."

"I'll be so relieved. I hate to go through the business of notifying all my credit-card people. By the way, Max Ritter phoned. He wanted to come right over but I said he couldn't before eleven. You have two biopsies this morning, you didn't finish reading yesterday's surgicals, and I'm not even go

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ing to let you look at the sections from Rhoda Robbins' brain, although they're out of formalin." Doris slid off her stool, picked up her notebook, followed Dr. Coffee into his office, and sat down beside his microscope. "Let's get to work," she said.

The pathologist spent the next three hours earning his salary from Pasteur Hospital. He was almost abreast of his workload when Max Ritter sauntered in.

"Hi, Doc! Any news from the chrom—from our hair analyst?"

"I don't expect any results for at least twenty-four hours, Max. It's a fairly complicated process even though it's automated. Did you have a stakeout on Cedric Kensington's place last night?"

"I did." Ritter planted one lean thigh on the corner of Dr. Coffee's desk. "Jenkins says our boy is home making onion soup when darling Doris gets conked. Got any other ideas?"

"Yes," said the pathologist. "You were the one who fingered our Doris last night."

"Me?"

"Certainly. You can be sure that Fredric Kensington told his father you had taken a hair specimen, and Kensington pere, either on the plane or in the taxi he managed to share with you, pooh-poohed the idea that you could prove anything in court by physical evidence about hair. Right?"

"Doc, you've got ESP."

"What's more," the pathologist continued, "I'll lay you a hundred to one that you boasted of Dr. Coffee's skills in the forensic sciences, and the miracles that would be performed by Dr. Mitchell, professor of molecular chemistry, and his automated wizardry at Northbank University."

Ritter's prominent Adam's apple marked a difficulty in his swallowing. "Maybe I do boast a little," he admitted. "Do I go out and pick up Papa Kensington for mugging?"

"Wait, Max. Let's consult the victim first. Doris!" The technician appeared in the doorway. "Do you agree to prosecute the man who slugged you last night?"

"Who was it?" Doris asked.

"Probably a middle-aged father who thought he was protecting one of his sons from a murder charge."

"Well, he really didn't hurt me." Doris was running her hands over her hips to smooth out the back of her smock. "I was scared, that's all. If I get back my bag and my credit cards and my seven dollars I'll forget it. Should I feel sorry for him?"

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"No," said Dr. Coffee. "Never condone violence. The man has more trouble than he deserves, but that's not the point. I think we can make a deal that will save Max time and trouble and still won't thwart the ends of justice."

Ritter's built-in frown deepened. "I don't go for deals—unless we get the brass ring back," he said. "What do we win?"

"I think Kensington can tell us what we ought to know about Shetland enterprises in Academia and why Fredric Kensington wanted to burn the place down."

"Why'n't you ask me?" Ritter inquired testily. "While in Academia yesterday I used a few unscientific old-style police methods like asking questions and taking a look-see myself at the site of arson and mayhem."

The detective described his visit to the burnt-out premises with hand gestures and head shakings. The Shetland Print Shop, he said, was not much of a shop at all—a mere hole in the wall in a two-story brick building not far from the Great Lakes campus. There was no heavy equipment—in fact, no typographical gear except a light hand press, but all sorts of multicopying devices, all badly damaged. But the arsonist seemed particularly anxious to destroy the product of the copying machines. There wasn't a single unburned sheet of paper left in the place, Ritter said, "and the joint still stank of gasoline."

The Academia police, the detective continued, seem to think that the Shetland Print Shop was some sort of secret joint for commercializing on cheating in examinations.

"It can't be very secret," Dr. Coffee interrupted, "with a name like Shetland. Since yesterday I've suspected that Shetland sold not only ponies for final and mid-term examinations, but theses for advanced degrees and probably term papers as well."

"What gave you that idea, Doc?"

"The typescript your man Brody brought me yesterday was a dissertation by a candidate for a master's degree. Rhoda Robbins apparently had some connection with Shetland. I've been wondering if her death didn't somehow involve the Shetland operation, rather than the unrequited love of one of the Kensington twins. Max, why don't you try to find out who besides Pete Hyde owns shares in Shetland?"

"Already done, Doc." Ritter produced the usual sheaf of dog-eared envelopes from an inside pocket, shuffled them,

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and put on the reading glasses he had been wearing for the past few months. "Peter Hyde, five shares; Rhoda Robbins, five shares; Mary Lamb, forty shares."

"No shares for the Kensington twins?"

"Nope, not according to the figures the Academia cops get from the county registrar of partnerships."

"So Mary Lamb, the banker's daughter, apparently put up the capital, or most of it, to get the business started," Dr. Coffee mused. He pursed his lips and ran his long fingers through his rumpled graying hair.

"Which reminds me," said Ritter, "of what I came for in the first place. You know Brody maybe ain't a genius, but he ain't bad at plain old-fashioned unscientific detecting. He brought in all the stuff we found at the murder scene, like the red apple with the joss sticks, the tarot cards, and the gal's slippers. Well, the cards were hopeless but we found Mary Lamb's prints on the apple and the slippers."

"How did you happen to have her prints for comparison, Max?"

"Routine. We took 'em the night of the murder so we could eliminate possible unknowns. Cedric's, too. His didn't show on the apple or the slippers."

"So?"

"So I'm on my way to call on Mary Lamb. She's been lying to me. I talked to her boy friend this morning, and he confirmed her story about saying good night on her front porch when one Kensington twin drove off. Only he gave me a different time. He said it happened an hour earlier than she claimed."

Dr. Coffee shook his head dubiously. "I wish you luck, Max," he said. "But don't forget she's a banker's daughter and that Papa can and undoubtedly will buy her the best lawyers on the market if you even hint that she's an accessory after the fact."

"You know lawyers don't scare me, Doc."

"See you tomorrow, then. I hope we can wrap this up by that time."

The mailman arrived at the pathology laboratory in midafternoon, carrying a large official-looking manila envelope.

"Doris Hudson," he said. "There's postage due."

The technologist squealed, undeterred by the pipette she was holding in her mouth. She disencumbered herself and slid from her stool.

"My bag!" she exclaimed. "How much do I owe?"

Dr. Coffee watched the ex-

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change of coins, the impatient ripping open of the envelope, the frowning scrutiny of the bag's contents, the smile that signaled complete restitution.

When the mailman had gone, Dr. Coffee asked, "All there?"

The smile vanished. "Except the test tubes, of course."

Dr. Coffee picked up the phone and asked the hospital operator to get him the law offices of George Kensington.

"Hello, Counselor? This is Dr. Coffee. I want to thank you for returning Miss Hudson's handbag so promptly . . . Why do you say 'nonsense?' Doris is delighted that . . . No, no, I'm sure you don't approve of such strongarm tactics, Counselor. In fact, I was surprised that a crusader for the truth like you have always been—no, I'm not accusing you, but since you are the only one outside of my staff and Lieutenant Ritter who knew that it was Professor Mitchell who—yes, yes, I understand perfectly. Of course I believe you.

"Then you'll be happy to know that we had duplicates of the hair specimens and that the analysis has been proceeding splendidly. In fact, I expect to get a read-out sometime tomorrow. I suppose you'd like to be present to represent your sons . . . Yes, of course bring Cedric. Bring the other twin too, if you can persuade Academia autho: ities to release him on bond. I' let you know when and where By the way, Counselor, whe you were in Academia yeste: day, I'm sure you must hav looked into what financial ir terest the twins might have ha in the combustible Shetland op eration . . . I see. No financi: interest at all. Goodbye, Cour selor. And thanks again on b half of Doris Hudson."

Dr. Coffee replaced th phone. When he looked up Do: is and Dr. Mookerji were stanc ing in the doorway grinning.

Ritter took Detective Se: geant Brody along when h drove out to the Lamb estate o the northern fringes of North bank. Brody was unsurpassed i his dogged pursuit of detail.

"Thanks, but we won't com in," Ritter said, as Mary Lam opened the front door hersel "We just want you to com with us while we have anothe look at your guesthouse Where's your lawyer? When phoned I told you to have you lawyer here."

Mary laughed. "I don't nee a lawyer. Or do I really? Ar you going to arrest me? Fc what?"

"If you've been lying t me," Ritter said, "and I thin you have, I could bust you a an accessory."

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"Before or after the fact?" Another laugh. "You see, I know all the words. I took a course at college last year—Law for the Citizen. Let's go, Lieutenant. You can consider that I've been warned and that I know my rights."

She closed the door behind her and stepped between the two detectives. Her white pleated tennis skirt flicked saucily behind her as she swung gaily down the path, the glint of sunlight in her pale golden hair.

"I want you to go through the same routine like the night you came in and found your gal friend dead," said Ritter as the trio entered the guesthouse.

"There was no routine. I just opened the door, saw Rhoda sitting against the side of the fireplace, called to her—"

"Do it," Ritter ordered.

Mary acted out the scene with appropriate words and screams. Ritter raised his hand to interrupt her in mid-screech.

"Did you stop yelling long enough to phone for cops?" he asked. He glanced at Brody who was watching open-mouthed.

"I guess I must have. I was hysterical, but I guess I made myself understood."

"Did you go out for dramatics at college?" Ritter asked.

"Why do you ask that?"

"Because your acting is super. The performance the other night was even better. You ought to go on the stage."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean all that grief and hysterical sobbing was phony. And you didn't phone for us cossacks until you'd taken your own sweet time to phony up this place but good."

Mary sat down suddenly on a couch near the hearth. Her eyes narrowed slightly as she said, "You really do think I've been lying to you, don't you?"

"So I finally get through to you," Ritter said. "Now tell me how you think Rhoda's pretty satin slippers got all the way down to the other end of the rug."

"She obviously kicked them off while she was struggling with the man who killed her," Mary said quickly.

"You say it's a man?"

"You do. You say the handful of hair she grabbed belonged to a man."

"If Rhoda kicked the slippers off, how come they land so neat, side by side? I guess you caught 'em in mid-air, because your prints were on both of 'em."

Mary's lips parted but she said nothing.

"And on that apple, too—the only prints," the detective went on. "I guess you polished it good before you lit those joss

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sticks to make us believe all that jazz about Rhoda being a real genuine mystic. I bet those tarot cards were yours, too."

Mary Lamb stood up.

"Sit down, Mary's little lamb, I ain't through with you. I've got some questions about your interest in that Shetland pony business at Great Lakes U."

"I think," said Mary, "that we had better postpone this interview after all. I'd like my attorney present."

"That's your right." Ritter tried not to grin too smugly. He bowed stiffly to her. Then he nodded to Brody, who had not uttered a word. "Come on, Brody. We're about talked out. Let's go."

It was midmorning next day when Dr. Coffee telephoned Ritter at the police station.

"I've finished the microscopic protocol on the Rhoda Robbins autopsy, Max," he said.

"Is it murder?" Ritter asked.

"In my opinion, yes. Whether you and the D.A. can prove it I can't guarantee. There's no doubt the girl died from a microscopic hemorrhage in the brain. She must have grabbed the murderer's hair before he banged her head against the bricks, because she was unconscious from the moment of impact. She might have lived for a few minutes in a coma, since the ambulance attendant reported the unusually high post-mortem temperature, but she was clinically dead almost instantly."

"When do you put the finger on the guilty twin, Doc? Or do you?"

"Dr. Mitchell has promised me results of his chromatographic comparison by this afternoon. You want to make a Federal case of it, with television and a press gallery?"

"Don't kid me, Doc. But with Papa Kensington and all his civil rights backstopping, maybe I ought to get that other twin down from Academia, even if he has to have a peace officer handcuffed to him. Whatya think, Doc?"

"Suit yourself, Max. Whatever you decide, I'll be ready."

The decision was not Ritter's to make, as it turned out. It was George Kensington who took command of events and forced the delivery of the other twin to Northbank by pressuring the District Attorney of Northbank County to ask for a fugitive warrant on suspicion of murder. And when Fredric Kensington was flown from Academia in handcuffs to be lodged in the county jail, his father changed hats and, as attorney for his

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defense, got a friendly judge to issue a writ of habeas corpus to be returned the following afternoon.

Kensington telephoned Dr. Coffee at home that night to tell him of his latest maneuver.

"I've decided to speed up the mills of God—or the wheels of justice, in case you're an atheist," the lawyer said. "I'm tired of waiting for you to spring your molecular miracles, so if you want to show off your scientific wares you'd better be in court tomorrow, Doctor."

"Thank you for warning me," said the pathologist. "If I'm called I'll be there."

The bailiff rose to his full six feet, threw out his chest, and bellowed, "All rise!"

The diminutive redheaded judge emerged from his chambers, the black robes of his dignity fluttering behind him as he mounted the steps to the bench.

The group of attorneys, principals, and witnesses rose dutifully while the bailiff's voice abated to a mumble about the superior court of such-and-such a jurisdiction being now in session and all those having business approach . . .

The audience sat down again. There was Mary Lamb surrounded by a battery of expensive attorneys, just in case her name should be mentioned in the proceedings; George Kensington sat at the attorney's table with his son Fredric still handcuffed to a peace officer. Cedric was not in the courtroom as far as Dr. Coffee could see.

An Assistant District Attorney was soon on his feet before the bench, objecting in a loud voice that the procedure was highly irregular inasmuch as the same counsel who had asked that the prisoner be detained on suspicion of murder was now arguing the illegality of his detention. The judge signaled with his head that George Kensington was also to approach the bench.

Dr. Coffee had come to court with Max Ritter without waiting for the promised chromatographic report from Northbank University. Ritter had insisted that the pathologist be on hand to testify in case the report was delayed. Dr. Mookerji would bring the report by hand as soon as it was ready.

The attorneys were still arguing at the bench when Dr. Mookerji appeared in the courtroom, waddled breathlessly into the witnesses area, and plumped his spheroidal form into a chair beside Dr. Coffee. He handed the pathologist a large manila envelope.

Dr. Coffee drew out several

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sheets of graph paper on which automated pens had drawn colored peaks and valleys, three yards of Z-folded paper strips bearing the figures and symbols of a computer print-out, and the typewritten pages of Dr. Miller's interpretation of the chromatographic analysis. As the pathologist flipped through the pages the judge spoke:

"I am informed, Dr. Coffee, that you may be able to offer evidence as to whether or not the subject of this writ should be held on suspicion of murdering one Rhoda Robbins. Is that true?"

"Yes, your Honor."

"Please take the stand."

Dr. Coffee was sworn, sat in the witness chair, and explained to the court how he had arranged to compare the hair of the suspects with the hair that Rhoda Robbins was clutching in her fingers when her body was found. He told why he had discarded several samples (they had not been recently cut) and how the hair of the two Kensington twins was finally sent to Northbank University to be compared by flame-ionization gas chromotography with the hair in the victim's fingers.

"The hair of one of the Kensington twins," said Dr. Coffee, "gave exactly the same molecular picture as the hair from the murder scene. The hair of the other twin did not.

"In what respect were the dissimilar?" the court asked.

"For one thing, there was faint trace of sulfur which wa probably produced by th phenothiazine which only on of the twins was taking as tranquilizer and which ca reach the hair. There was also strong indication of seleniun which is the component of scalp treatment which only on twin was using and which ha obviously been absorbed by hi hair."

"Are you referring to th twin now in this courtroom?

"No, your Honor. It is Ced ric Kensington's hair that mat ches," said Dr. Coffee.

"Then I remand Fredri Kensington to the custody o the authorities of Academia," ruled the judge. "Where is th other twin?"

"He should be here at any minute, your Honor," said Rit ter. "I've sent for him."

It was several minutes befor Detective Sergeant Jenkins en tered the courtroom—alone From the expression on hi round face he might have jus come from the funeral of hi best friend. He handed Ritter a gray rectangular object the size of a deck of cards.

"What the hell is this?" Rit ter demanded. "And where is Cedric Kensington?"

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Jenkins didn't know the answer to either question. He had found the rectangular object, apparently the cartridge for a cassette tape recorder, in Cedric's pad with a note asking that it be transmitted to Lieutenant Ritter. Cedric himself had departed, Jenkins didn't know when, by devious means which Jenkins also didn't know—apparently a door leading into another apartment or the roof or some exit invisible from the street.

"Let's get on the ball and get that old dragnet going," said Ritter, outdoing himself as an unparalleled metaphor mixer, "before the scent gets cold."

The detective took off like a sprinter, the cassette cartridge clasped tightly in his hand, the Assistant District Attorney in hot pursuit and Jenkins a poor third.

Dr. Coffee would have liked to join the procession but Dr. Mookerji reminded him that they were due back at the hospital for a biopsy that afternoon. He would have to wait to learn what was on the tape.

"You are perhaps of opinion, Dr. Sahib," said the Hindu resident as they drove back to work, "that recording tape contains last will and confession of guilty twin before suiciding self in river?"

"Possibly," said the pathologist. "After all, his mother took her own life, and the boy seemed to be a sensitive character the one time I saw him. Still, he belongs to a cynical generation whose actions are not always predictable. We'll find out soon enough."

They found out that evening when Ritter brought Cedric's tape to the laboratory. It had been played earlier in the D.A.'s office for the edification of the D.A.'s and Ritter's staff. After hearing it, the detective had phoned to ask Dr. Coffee's permission to bring George Kensington along for the second playback.

The tape recorder was perched on Doris Hudson's workbench.

"I'll be long gone when you hear this, Ritter," said Cedric's voice when Ritter pushed the playback switch. "You should teach Sergeant Jenkins to examine the interior of a dwelling for alternate exits before he takes up a vigil on the exterior. I decided to split when I discovered that I was able to come and go without detection to seize Miss Hudson's handbag. No, my father didn't do it, though he did tip me off.

"Yes, I killed Rhoda Robbins, as you certainly know by now. I didn't mean to kill her. No, that's not true. For a few

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seconds when I attacked her I did want her dead. Temporary insanity will be my plea if you ever catch me. And it wasn't her phony promise of marriage to Fred or me that drove me mad either, although I guess for Fred her perfidy must have been pretty disillusioning, enough for him to beat up Pete Hyde. For me the trigger was the whole Shetland business—the Old Forgery, they used to call it on the campus—and the way they exploited us.

"Rhoda considered she could pay me off for writing a term paper with a few kisses and maybe a $50 bonus, the way she'd seduce a professor out of his exam questions, so Shetland could sell the answers to the kids at $5 or $10 a crack. But the day I killed her I'd just found out that Shetland would sell my $50 dissertations to a national syndicate for $1000 or more. I guess I hated all of them—Pete Hyde the sales manager, Mary Lamb, who bankrolled the Old Forgery, or Rhoda, the talent scout—but I hated Rhoda most because I thought I was in love with her.

"Mary phoned me that you had figured out she had phonied up the scene after I left. I had nothing to do with that. That was Mary's attempt to salvage the Old Forgery before she knew Fred had set it afire.

"I make no apologies to my father or to anyone else for my contribution to throwing the educational system out of joint. I acted in complete accord with today's morality. Anything for a buck. If it pays off it's right and good and a benefit to civilization. Honor to the corrupt if they can get away with a million. Three cheers for private enterprise. If we must die to preserve the establishment, why not murder for profit?

"Try to find me, Lieutenant, on behalf of law and order. If you can get extradition papers, you may see me again. In the meantime nuts to you. I leave Mary Lamb and Pete Hyde to your tender mercies."

Ritter shut off the recording. He turned to the father of the twins. "Kensington," he said, "your tricky little pixy of a son in going to find that the Royal Canadians are on the side of law and order too, and they ain't all as dumb as Jenkins."

There was a long silence. George Kensington sat motionless, staring across the laboratory at an open cupboard. On the shelves were rows of glass jars containing snippets of the vital organs from previous autopsies, filed for reference. Dr. Coffee looked at him sympathetically, wondering what thoughts were going through his mind as he contemplated those

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pathetic reminders of mortality. Here was a man with basically kind instincts who was dedicated to humanity and to helping the underdog, yet whose reward seemed to be only disappointment and tragedy.

"Counselor," Dr. Coffee said, "your offspring seem to believe in direct action. Where did they get their violent chromosomes?"

Kensington was silent.

Ritter said, "Hey, Doc, how about your theories? Who gets the decision—heredity or environment?"

"Hard to say, Max," the pathologist replied, "since Cedric's internal environment was partially dependent on a bottle of phenothiazine tablets which I found empty when we visited his pad. Perhaps if Cedric hadn't run out of tranquilizers just before he discovered that Rhoda had been playing him and his twin for a pair of suckers, our story—his story—might have taken a less tragic turn."

"Man's karma," commented Dr. Mookerji, "is depending upon deeds, not tranquilizers."

"Q"

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a *NEW* Photographer story by

JAMES HOLDING

The Photographer is back . . . the Nullifier (his euphemism for murderer), always on the alert for ways and means of increasing his fee . . . the hired assassin, as tough and cool a customer as ever concealed an automatic pistol in a camera case—or death in the edge of a left hand . . .

THE PHOTOGRAPHER AND THE ARTIST

by JAMES HOLDING

The Photographer. That's what his contacts in Rio called him. And he was, in truth, a professional photographer of good repute. His real name, however, was Manuel Andradas. And photography was not his only line of business.

A sallow unremarkable man except for unusually powerful forearms and a pair of muddy brown eyes as flat and opaque as swamp water, he sat on a secluded bench in the Botanical Gardens, waiting for Rodolfo to appear. The rendezvous had been made by telephone the night before.

At precisely five minutes to three Rodolfo came strolling down one of the garden's jungled paths, his monkey arms swinging like pendulums to mark his progress. He was smiling—if you could call the long oily lift of thick lips over his protruding teeth a smile. He sat down on the bench beside Manuel.

Manuel said, "Who is it this time, Rodolfo?"

"An artist, our client says. A man."

"*Quanto?*" asked Manuel. "How much?"

"Thirty thousand." Rodolfo held up a hand as Manuel opened his mouth to protest. "No use complaining to me again that you are underpaid,

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Photographer. Thirty thousand cruzeiros is the limit. I was told to pass that word along to you by the Big Ones themselves."

Manuel, out of long experience, shrugged in resignation. "It is far too little. A *pitanca* only. But I need the money." He lifted his eyes to Rodolfo, making no attempt to keep his dislike from showing in them. "Have you got the name and address?"

With a quick smooth gesture Rodolfo slid a card from his breast pocket and handed it to Manuel who memorized the name and address on it, then slowly tore the card into tiny scraps and placed them in a side pocket of his jacket. "A poor neighborhood," he said sarcastically, "so he must be a poor artist, hardly worth nullifying, eh? And that explains the Corporation's niggardliness, no doubt."

"Do you want the job or don't you?"

"I said I did. Is there a deadline?"

"The sooner the better. Today, if possible."

"Today?" Manuel grumbled. "And no bonus for speed, I suppose?"

"No bonus. Just do it and bring me the proof."

"*Vae bem.* I get one-third now?"

"As usual." Rodolfo rose, shook hands with Manuel, and strode off. He left a pad of banknotes in the Photographer's hand. When his footsteps on the gravel path died away, it was so quiet that Manuel could hear the liquid sound of water trickling down the tiled drainage ditch beside his bench.

Diogo Bilboa's "studio," a dilapidated wooden building hardly better than a shack, was situated only a thousand yards from the lower fringe of Kerosene Hill. A poor neighborhood indeed. Yet the moment Manuel met the artist himself, he knew that here was no penniless, slum-dwelling nonentity as he had expected, but instead, an educated, urbane, and probably talented man temporarily in the clutch of unkind circumstance.

With his camera case slung over his shoulder, Manuel skulked behind a convenient *jaragua* bush until he could approach the studio unseen. Then he advanced, knocked boldly on the unpainted door, and a moment later was facing, across its threshold, a cadaverous man in his late forties with high cheekbones, a drooping mustache, and wary, defensive eyes under heavy black brows.

Manuel said politely, "Senhor Bilboa?"

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"*Sim*," acknowledged Bilboa, releasing with the word a gusty breath richly laden with wine fumes. His smile was that of a lonely man who welcomes company. "What can I do for you?"

Manuel presented his card. "I am a photographer," he explained, "currently on assignment for the magazine called *Rio Illustrated*. Do you know it?"

"I have seen it, yes, and seen some of your work in it, Senhor Andradas." Bilboa stepped back. "Please come in," he invited. "We are fellow artists, you and I."

"*Muito obrigado*," said Manuel, following his host into the studio. "Thanks. But fellow artists?"

"Of course. We merely serve art with different tools." Bilboa's tongue stumbled a bit over the words. He waved Manuel into a ramshackle chair, the only one in the room, and offered him aromatic sherry in a chipped earthenware cup. Manuel accepted gravely and, taking his first sip, surveyed the room over the rim of the cup.

It seemed to be studio and living quarters all in one. An unglazed opening in the north wall, which looked as though it had been chopped out with a blunt ax, admitted enough daylight for Bilboa to paint by. A rolled-up piece of old canvas, suspended from rusty hooks above the aperture, explained how the artist kept the weather out. An easel, a neat but unmade bed, a rough table where pigment tubes and clustered paint brushes mingled with many empty wine bottles, completed the furnishings, except for a dozen unframed abstract paintings scattered about the room. There was no sign of cooking or toilet facilities, and only an ancient oil lamp with a cracked chimney could challenge the dark.

Noting Manuel's questing eyes, Bilboa said without apology, "Rather primitive, isn't it? The best I can afford for the moment. But things will be different soon, let us hope." It was said with sardonic humor, as one artist to another.

Manuel said, "I am sure that an artist of your stature cannot long remain obscure, even in Rio."

At these words Bilboa's swarthy face lost some color, it seemed to Manuel, and the wary look in his eyes sharpened, as though the Photographer's casual remark had touched a sensitive nerve. The artist poured himself some wine, slopping a little over the cup's edge. Resting one hip on the edge of his worktable he

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said, "I am at a loss to understand *Rio Illustrated*'s interest in me, Senhor Andradas. I am but newly resident in Rio and with no reputation as yet." His voice changed subtly. "Yet you called me 'an artist of your stature' just now?"

"I was judging solely by the work I see around me," Manuel answered. He gestured at the artist's canvases. "They are superb. Besides, you said yourself that things would be different for you soon, did you not? *Rio Illustrated* could be interested in *that*, you know."

Bilboa hesitated noticeably. At length he said, "I sold a painting yesterday at a good price, that's all. So I shall soon have enough *dinheiro* to get out of this filthy place." He swept a look of contempt around his studio.

Manuel said, "Congratulations. To a local buyer, eh?"

"Yes."

"May I ask his name?"

"*Perdao*, it is a confidential transaction. Sorry," said Bilboa.

Manuel said evenly, "The purpose of my visit to you today is also confidential, Senhor Bilboa. Quite simply, I have come here to nullify you."

Bilboa gave him a puzzled look. "Nullify me? I don't understand."

"It is my word for murder," Manuel informed him gravely. "A man must have some respect for his profession. I am a professional assassin."

The artist stared. "You came here to *kill* me?"

"Yes. How would you like to die? I have no objection to making it as easy as I can for you."

The artist laughed. "You're mad! Why should you wish to kill me?"

"I don't. I am merely the instrument."

"I don't believe you. You're not a paid killer. You're a photographer, a professional. I know your work. You're playing a joke, perhaps? If so, it's in very poor taste I must say, Senhor Andradas!"

Manuel shook his head. "It is no joke. Somebody wants you dead. And I have been hired to accommodate him." He hesitated, then said, "Perhaps I can convince you, Senhor Bilboa." He drained the last of his sherry and set the thick earthenware cup in the palm of his right hand and curved his spatulate fingers around it. "Observe," he said quietly, "and think of this cup as your neck, Senhor Bilboa."

Slowly he closed his fingers on the cup and squeezed. The muscles of his forearm bulged under his sleeve like thick wires stretched to their utmost limits.

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And suddenly, with a kind of muffled explosive sound, the heavy crockery crumbled in Manuel's grip into a thousand shards. He opened his fingers and allowed the fragments to drop in a shower to the bare floor of the studio, together with a few drops of blood from his cut hand.

He did all this with an air of cruel calculated deliberation. Its effect was terrifying.

"*Santa Maria!*" exclaimed Bilboa as horror touched him. The flesh under his high cheekbones seemed to sag. "They have traced me here from Portugal so soon!" His eyes went desperately about him for a weapon.

"From Portugal?" The Photographer inquired. "Someone tried to kill you there, also?"

"No, but the police—" Bilboa's teeth snapped shut over the word *polica.*

"Ah, the police," said Manuel, clicking his tongue in deprecation. "They are a nuisance, are they not? And may I ask what you had done to offend them?"

"What difference does it make?" The artist groped furtively behind him for the neck of a wine bottle.

"*Pare!*" said Manuel sharply. "Stop." He dipped his bloody hand into his camera case and drew out an automatic pistol. He pointed the pistol at Bilboa. "You see? Why not answer my question? It will at least prolong your life for a moment or two. At most it may save it. I promise nothing, of course."

He could see a spark of hope kindle in the artist's eye. Bilboa licked his lips. "Bilboa is not my right name," he said, staring at Manuel's pistol barrel. "In Portugal I was known as Diogo Dias."

Manuel's eyebrows went up a fraction of an inch. In this world Manuel loved only two things: photography and money. And with the artist's words he suddenly caught the elusive heady odor of money in this shabby room and he smiled for the first time since the interview had begun. "Diogo Dias?" he repeated. "The forger of art masterpieces? Even I have heard of him."

"The whole world has heard of him, I fear," said Bilboa sadly, "since the museum in Brussels discovered that one of its prized 'Old Masters' had been painted by me."

"Yes," said Manuel, "I remember. Even here in the provinces that story was all over the newspapers. However, you escaped. You are here."

"True. But without a penny to my name, alas."

"So all you brought to Rio was a new name and your skill

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is a painter of fake masterpieces?"

"Yes. Except for a telephone number which, a friend in Lisbon assured me, would put me in touch with a local patron here who would help me gain a foothold."

"The man to whom you sold a painting yesterday?"

"Yes."

"At a good price, you said. So it wasn't one of these daubs"—Manuel jerked his chin at the canvases around him—"but a forged old master, perhaps, that you sold to this local *patrao*?"

"A Goya!" Bilboa said eagerly. He became animated, his face took on a flush of enthusiasm. "I painted him a Goya—an unknown, but historically possible, Goya!"

Manuel lowered his pistol as a sign of interest. "So?"

"Yes. You must understand that about 1810 the great Spaniard, Goya, began a series of so-called 'occupational' paintings of which only two—*The Water Carriers* and *The Knife Grinder*—have ever come to light. Both are now in the Budapest Museum. So I am clever. I am cautious enough to paint fakes which could reasonably exist somewhere, you see? That is why I painted for my new patron a third picture of Goya's occupational series, unknown until today—a potter forming a clay bowl on his wheel. Think of it, Senhor! A brand-new, never-before-known Goya, called *The Potter*, naturally.

"My patron was very pleased with his instant masterpiece. If I say so myself, it *is* a masterpiece—I defy anyone to distinguish it from a genuine Goya. I know the secret of making new paintings seem old; my forgeries deceive expert critics and chemical analysis alike. I have sold forged masterpieces, with manufactured provenances, to a dozen European galleries without discovery—until that unfortunate accident in Brussels six months ago."

The Photographer nodded. "So the newspapers claimed at the time." He paused. "I can assure you of one thing. It is not the Portuguese police who have sent me to kill you. No. Someone here in Brazil wishes you removed."

"But who?" asked the artist. "Why not tell me? Surely you know who hired you?" He poured more wine for himself and tossed it off nervously.

Manuel was thinking, although his face was as expressionless as ever. He replied absently, "A criminal organization—the Corporation, the Big Ones, as they are

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called—hired me. But only to implement *their* agreement with a client unknown to me." He gave the artist a level look. "Perhaps you can now guess the identity of the Corporation's unknown client?"

Bewildered, the artist spread his hands in a gesture of ignorance.

"Your new patron," murmured Manuel. "Who else?"

Bilboa stared at him. "Why would *he* want me killed, for God's sake? I just told you how pleased he was with my forged Goya."

"Has he paid you for the Goya yet?"

"No. Tomorrow, when the banks open, he promised."

"And how much is he paying you?"

"Two hundred thousand cruzeiros—not a tenth what the painting will bring after it is 'discovered'! Not a twentieth!"

Two hundred thousand, thought Manuel in disgust. And for canceling this heavy debt, I receive a paltry thirty. Aloud he said, "Let us be realistic. By removing you, your patron does not have to pay you for his Goya. He also silences forever the only man besides himself who knows it is a forgery."

Bilboa drew himself up. "Diogo Dias never betrays a customer!"

"You have just done so," Manuel pointed out. "And if your patron saw these numerous wine bottles when he came to collect his painting yesterday—"

The artist flushed. "He feared I might get drunk and talk, you mean? It takes more than a little wine—"

Manuel waved him to silence with the revolver. "Enough. What interests me now is this: who *is* your patron in Rio?"

"I do not know his name," Bilboa said. "He thought it safer so, for both of us."

"You saw him, didn't you?"

"Only once—when he came for the painting yesterday."

"Then describe him," Manuel suggested. "Perhaps *I* know him."

"He looked like this." Bilboa put a pad of drawing paper on his easel, took a stick of charcoal, and with a few quick, miraculously deft strokes, sketched a man's head on the paper. Bald head, protruding eyes, piglike features.

"Do you know him?" the artist asked, tossing down the charcoal and resuming his half seat on the edge of the worktable.

"No." Manuel hid his disappointment. "You have his telephone number, however."

"It wasn't his. It was an answering service which put me through to him."

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"A pity," Manuel said. He placed his camera case on the floor beside his chair and stood up. "If we knew the man's name I might have convinced him—for a fee—to cancel his arrangement with the Big Ones for your death. Now, however" —Manuel's voice held regret— "will you turn your back, Senhor Bilboa?"

The artist blanched until his face was leeched of all color. "*Por favor!*" he began raggedly. "Please! You said—"

"Turn around," Manuel repeated. "Or will you watch yourself die?" He brought up the pistol.

In desperate reflex the artist clumsily swung a wine bottle from behind his back. He was far too slow. The stiffened edge of the Photographer's left hand, propelled with enormous strength and velocity, struck the base of Bilboa's throat with a sodden thud, like a hammer striking soft earth.

The artist died instantly.

Manuel drew a length of frayed rope from his camera case, looped one end tightly about the neck of Diogo Bilboa, and, hoisting the limber body high, tied the other end of the rope to one of the hooks above the chopped-out window. Next he moved the artist's worktable near enough to the window to have served the dead artist as a launching platform for his final step in this world. Then he carefully photographed the result, well pleased with his realistic presentation of a poor unknown artist who had obviously preferred suicide to further struggle.

This done, he replaced the camera and the gun in his camera case. He looked carefully about the room for anything that might betray his presence there. And finally he tore Bilboa's drawing of his unknown *patrao* from the artist's drawing pad and, rolling the thin tissue into a tidy cylinder with affectionate deliberation, he placed that too in his camera case.

Then he left the studio.

That evening, in response to a telephone call from Manuel, Rodolfo met the Photographer in a small café near the flower market on Rua do Ouvidor. After the ritual of coffee drinking Rodolfo said, "Well?"

The Photographer put down his cup. "This afternoon as specified. No trouble. One moment he was sketching at his easel, the next he was dead." Manuel passed a five-by-seven-inch print across the table to Rodolfo.

Rodolfo smiled his odious smile. "This one hanged himself, eh?"

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"Regrettably, yes."

Rodolfo put the photograph in his pocket. "This should satisfy our client that we have fulfilled his wishes. You'll have the balance of your fee tomorrow. At three in the Gardens?" He drained his coffee cup and made to rise.

Manuel restrained him with a hand on his arm. "Will you recommend a bonus for me, Rodolfo? For a clean fast job, expertly done?"

"No bonus. I told you. The Big Ones—"

Manuel interrupted. "The Big Ones are not in business for their health, presumably. So perhaps *they* would like a bonus from this client?"

"What do you mean?"

Gingerly Manuel took the charcoal sketch of Bilboa's patron from his camera case, unrolled it, and handed it to Rodolfo. "As I said, your artist Bilboa was amusing himself doodling at his easel when I visited him this afternoon. This was what he was drawing."

Rodolfo's eyes narrowed. "Who is it?" he asked, a shade too quickly.

"I have no idea," said Manuel, shrugging. "I thought the Big Ones might know."

"What made you think so?" Rodolfo kept his gaze on the sketch.

"The graffiti seemed suggestive," Manuel said. He pointed to three sentences which he himself had scrawled carelessly under Balboa's sketch not half an hour before. "Picture of a Man without a Name" one said. Another: "My unknown patron looks like this." And the third: "Tomorrow he will make me rich." Question marks were scattered at random around the sketched head. At the very bottom of the sheet was a smeared but legible signature, also added in a disguised hand by Manuel: Diogo Bilboa.

Rodolfo nodded. "I see. You wish me to show this to the Big Ones, is that it?"

"Why not? If it is a picture of their client, perhaps he may consider this sketch worth a small bonus. As an expression of gratitude, shall we say, that the Corporation did not allow the sketch to be found by the police in the same room with a penniless suicide. Embarrassing, to say the least, eh?"

Rodolfo was silent for a long moment. Then, meeting the Photographer's eyes at last, he said on a note of approbation, "What is your idea of a 'small' bonus, Photographer? I am well aware that you are an astute judge of such matters."

"One hundred thousand cruzeiros," returned Manuel promptly. "Half for the Big Ones, half for me."

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"Modest, as always." Rodolfo laughed. "Very well."

"You may wish to mention also," said Manuel softly, "that I have photographed that sketch, with its signature and all its doodles—just in case the client balks."

"Very clever," Rodolfo said. He stood up. "And I suppose you will destroy your negative if he pays the bonus?"

Manuel looked hurt. "Of course," he said. "Do you think I am a cheat?"

Rodolfo chose not to answer. He walked away, leaving Manuel with the coffee *conta.* The Photographer, for once, was willing to pay for the coffee. He ordered another *cafezhino* and sat on at the table for some time, his thoughts ranging pleasantly beyond the 70,000 cruzeiros he would collect tomorrow to another reflection equally satisfying: the fascinating possibilities for profit which would be presented to him sometime soon, when a baldheaded, pig-featured citizen of Rio—at present unknown to Manuel but sure to be revealed by the fanfare of publicity—would announce to the world his miraculous discovery of a long-lost masterpiece by the great Spanish painter, Francisco Goya.

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 385th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . with an interesting and unusual background, and a murder to match . . .

The author, Mike W. Barr, was 20 when we accepted his "first story" and a junior at the University of Akron, majoring in English, with certification to teach. For fun, he collects mystery and comic books, and enjoys punning. His letter to your Editor has some interesting comments: for example, he wrote that "many critics maintain that the formal detective story is dead—but I couldn't disagree more. As a matter of fact, I think we are about to enter the Second Golden Age of the Detective Story, with equal emphasis placed on characterization and plot twists."

Mr. Barr says he has plots galore in his mind and will do his "best to see that each and every one of them sees print—after all, writing is the only occupation that pays persons for carrying out their fantasies" . . .

CRIME AT THE COMICONVENTION

by MIKE W. BARR

The entire room looked like a rack of comic books come to life. Everyone in the place was dressed as his or her favorite comic-book character, making the Banquet Hall one giant gaudy display of brilliant colors. Captain Marvel and Superman rubbed shoulders, Little Orphan Annie and Li'l Abner swapped stories, and Captain America joked with the Sub-Mariner.

The place was New York City, the occasion the 1973 Comic Book Fans Convention.

My fiancé, Gardner Frost, and I, Karen Ashwin, threaded our way through the crowd of fans, looking for familiar faces

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We were dressed as The Batman and Batgirl, a brainstorm of Gar's. He thought it appropriate, because they're comic-book detectives and we're criminologists. I'm President of Ashwin Investigations, Inc., and Gar is Vice-President in Charge of Investigations.

"You see anyone you know, Karen?" he asked.

"No," I said. "Do you?"

He was about to reply negatively, but he never got the chance. Someone called out, "Gar!" and we both turned. A man in a flashy green-and-gold costume was hurrying toward us, holding a small gold statuette above his head. He stopped in front of us, held out the statuette proudly, and exclaimed, "I won, I won!"

Now Gar knew who he was. "Herb!" he cried, shaking hands. "Herb O'Sergius! Calm down, man. What did you win?"

Herb was incredulous. "You weren't at the Awards Banquet?"

"We got here too late," I said. "What did you win, Herb?"

"A Heroman!"

"A what?"

"The award that comic-book fans give to their favorite professionals each year," said Gar, pointing to the inscription that read, *Best Editor of a Professional Comic Magazine.*

"That means," said Herb, "that the comic book I edit, *Might Master*, is the fans' favorite."

Gar nodded happily. "Too bad it's not real gold," he joked. "But I always said you deserved one of these, Herb."

"What about the rest of us?" said someone behind me. I turned to see a man dressed in gray coveralls with a white swastika on the front. Under his arm he carried a red skull-like mask. The man was Frank O'Sergius, Herb's older brother.

"Hello, Frank," said Gar, as they shook hands. "That's a nice costume. Who are you supposed to be?"

"The Red Skull," replied Frank. "The most famous Nazi villain of all." Then Gar tried to keep the subject changed, but he couldn't.

"I'm the artist for *Might Master*," Frank said to me. "I was nominated for a Heroman award, too—Best Artist. I even designed the statuette for them."

"And you didn't win?" I asked.

"No, I didn't," said Frank coldly. "My little brother got an award for cutting and pasting some pages together, but I, one of the really creative people—"

"Give him a break, Frank,"

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said Gar. "You know as well as I do that the editor of a magazine has one of the hardest jobs—and Herb is no exception."

Out of the corner of my eye I saw a tall man in an entirely red costume coming toward us. His cowl and cape were dark red, with the tunic, tights, gloves, and boots a bright scarlet. "That may be true, Gar," the tall man said, joining in the conversation, "but I hope you'll admit that writers and artists *do* make an important contribution."

"Not the stuff *you* turn out," said Gar, grinning broadly. "Those things aren't fit to wrap fish in."

The red intruder, who was the third O'Sergius—Clay, writer for *Might Master*—gave Gar a friendly punch in the arm.

"How have you been, Gar?" he asked. Gar replied he was just fine, and asked him about his costume.

"I'm dressed as Mr. Scarlet," said Clay, "The Red Scourge of Crime."

It seemed to me that all three O'Sergius brothers were reeling a bit. And when I saw Clay O'Sergius drink from a flask that he took out of his cape pocket, I knew why.

"Now look, Clay," Gar was saying. His effort to change the subject had failed again. "I don't want to get into a discussion of the relative merits of your writing and—"

But it looked as if he would not be able to avoid an argument. I looked around to escape and saw Herb O'Sergius talking with a young woman.

"Karen," said Herb, as I approached them, "this is my wife—Alice." Now I saw that they wore matching wedding bands.

Alice O'Sergius was fragile-looking, but she had a kind of calculating, shrewd air. She was wearing a costume that was predominantly white, with red trim. "That's a very nice costume," I said. "Who are you supposed to be?"

"A character called The Crimson Girl," she replied. "She's always been one of my favorites." Alice glanced over at the Great Debate, saw that Frank O'Sergius was helping Clay double-team my man, smiled, and excused herself. She joined in the conversation, glared at Frank and Clay, and murmured, "You poor babies! You're pouting because Herb gets just as much money as you do for his work on *Might Master*, and because he won an award and you both didn't. Well, guess what? He deserves it—he gives both of you most of your ideas, anyway."

This had the effect of stifling

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the discussion, so she rejoined Herb and me and began making more prosaic conversation. It had been a valiant defense of a loved one, but it left me just a bit skeptical, as if she had done it only because she, as a wife, had been expected to. Somehow it didn't ring true.

"Well," said Gar, after a few more minutes, "Karen and I have to be going—the Costume Contest is due to start soon and I want to get *some* benefit out of walking around in this thing all evening." As we walked across the room, I noticed Clay and Frank talking together, and Herb and Alice walking away from them.

"It's really too bad," Gar was saying. "They've got a lot of talent, but every time one of them gets an honor or some recognition the other two gang up on him."

"When did Herb get married?"

"A few months ago, I think, but scuttlebutt around fandom says that he's already considering a divorce."

We entered the room where the costume judging was to take place and hung around for nearly an hour before it got under way. However, comic fans are among the most jovial of people, and the time passed pleasantly.

The judging finally started, and Gar and I won first prize as Best Costumed Couple. The prize was a very old comic book that I didn't see much in, but it made Gar almost drop his glasses.

We were going out to get a little air, when the Comiconvention chairman, Phil Talbot, spotted us. He approached Gar, ignoring me, and talked for a few seconds before nodding and rushing off. Gar seemed to be gathering his will power.

"What's the matter, honey?" I asked.

"Herb O'Sergius," he replied. "He's been murdered."

We were looking at the body of Herb O'Sergius when I broke the silence. "Someone certainly did a job on him."

We were standing outside a small storage closet, just off the Banquet Hall. "Someone" had got Herb in there and then beaten the life out of him with Herb's Heroman statuette—it was lying by his side, fingerprintless and coated with gore. Herb's face was smashed almost beyond recognition, and there were spatters of blood all over the floor.

"Someone certainly did, Ms. Ashwin—blood was spattered over everything during the fight," replied Lieutenant Mark Jacobs, eyeing me a bit strangely. A female who didn't crum-

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ple into a helpless bundle at the sight of a corpse was a bit unusual to him. He glanced at the bloodstained floor, then at his second-in-command. "How are you coming along, Simons?"

Sergeant Clark Simons, thin, wiry, and businesslike, consulted his notebook. "No one's left the hall for over an hour, sir—long before this man was dead, according to the Medical Examiner." Then he indicated the body. "Seems pretty obvious to me, Lieutenant. The killer probably told the victim that he wanted to talk to him, and that back here it would be quieter. That sounds flimsy, of course, but if the victim had as much liquor in him as the M.E. figures, he probably wasn't thinking very straight, anyway. The killer grabbed the victim's statuette and started swinging—there was a bloody struggle—"

"There sure was," I said.

"—and the killer just left him like that when he was dead."

"When he *thought* he was dead," amended Gar softly.

"That's right," nodded the Lieutenant, pointing behind the corpse. Three rolls of bright-colored crepe paper that had been used as table decorations were lying in the closet. Herb O'Sergius' right hand clutched a length of red crepe paper. "Apparently, before he died, he grabbed a hunk of paper from the red roll—there would have been enough light coming under the door for him to see the color."

"But why?"

"To indicate his killer, Karen."

"Give me credit for a little sense, Gar. What I meant was, what did he mean by it?"

"Off-hand," said Jacobs, dead-pan, "I'd say he meant to indicate the color red."

Gar lifted his gaze to meet the policeman's, took off his glasses, and nodded. "I think so too, Mark. The red paper was the farthest away from him. If he simply wanted a piece of paper, any piece of paper, he would have grabbed the blue or the green."

There was nothing further to be done in the closet, so Jacobs had Phil Talbot and an ill-at-ease waiter brought back. Phil's costume was spotlessly white, as pale as his face.

"I understand you found the body, Mr. Talbot."

"Yeah," said Phil. "I mean no, *I* didn't find him—*he* did." He pointed to the waiter.

The waiter nodded. "Yes, sir. I was looking for a broom to sweep up with, and I found him here when I opened the closet—I called Mr. Talbot." He looked away as attendants took the body out of the closet.

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"First I called Gar," added Phil, "then I called the police."

"Okay," said Jacobs, making notations. "Either of you disturb anything?" Phil and the waiter shook their heads and were dismissed.

Gar was still thinking about Herb O'Sergius' last living action. "The color red as a dying message," he muttered. "That's all we need."

"What do you mean?" Jacobs asked.

"Everyone here," explained Gar, "is in costume—except you and the waiters, of course—you couldn't get in without a costume."

"So?"

"Well, our main suspects are Herb O'Sergius' family—and his brother Frank is dressed as The Red Skull—Clay O'Sergius is in the costume of Mr. Scarlet—and Alice O'Sergius is The Crimson Girl."

Lieutenant Jacobs nodded and sighed. "I was afraid of that."

Looking back on the case now, I see that we had enough facts at that time to solve the crime—but Lieutenant Jacobs was occupied with necessary routine, and Gar and I were trying too hard to see the obvious.

The first thing we did during this break in the investigation was to switch our base of operations to an old office across from the Banquet Hall. By this time most of the people present had been questioned and sent home. Special attention was given to any other comic-book professionals whom Herb O'Sergius might have hurt, but all these either had alibis or had no opportunity.

The three main suspects were interviewed, and here are samples of their testimony:

G. Frost: Now look, Clay, this looks pretty bad for you and your family, so you ought to cooperate with us. If not—confound it, man, you could be charged with *murder*—do you realize that?

C. O'Sergius: Go to hell.

Lieutenant Jacobs: I realize this must be a strain on you, Mr. O'Sergius—

F. O'Sergius: Strain? Not really, Lieutenant. I know I'm one of the chief suspects, and I suppose you also know that Alice is going to sell me and Clay her share of the *Might Master* rights—Herb's share—but I didn't kill him.

K. Ashwin: What do you mean, you won't answer any questions, Alice?

A. O'Sergius: I didn't say I *won't*, Karen, I said I *can't*. Herb never talked to me about business matters. But what you

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were asking about a divorce is true—he said he was thinking it over. I begged him not to, but he said he'd let me know when he decided.

It turned out that none of the three suspects could establish an alibi for the time the murder was committed. Alice was sitting by herself most of the evening, and although Clay and Frank did a lot of autographing, their fans could not tell exactly what time they had accosted their idols.

Later, while Lieutenant Jacobs and Sergeant Simons were reporting to Headquarters, Gar and I were still trying to interpret the dying message. We had come up with several "red" clues, but how could we know which one Herb had meant? At last Gar threw up his hands and began pacing the room.

"I think we're giving the dying message too much importance," he announced. "I get the feeling there's something we've missed, Karen."

"That may be, Gar," I replied, "but I'm sticking with the dying message. I think 'red' will somehow lead us to the truth."

He grinned. "Fine. You take the high road and I'll take the low road."

So we kept on thinking. I stayed rooted in my chair, and Gar paced, polishing his wire-rimmed glasses and muttering to himself. And then the answer hit both of us at the same time. He sat down and cracked his knuckles, looking like a poker player who'd just won the big pot of the evening. He had solved it, and so had I.

Finally he stopped congratulating himself.

"Who did it, Gar?" I asked.

"You tell me," he said.

"Oh, no. I asked you first."

He nodded and said a name. I nodded, and we sent out for some sandwiches and some policemen, to prepare for the revelation to follow.

In a few minutes Lieutenant Jacobs came back. "What is it, Gar?"

"Have a sandwich, Mark—you must be hungry—and I want you to do me a favor."

"Shoot," he replied, munching on a salami on rye.

Gar asked to be allowed to handle his solution the way all the famous book detectives did. Jacobs agreed, but with one condition.

"If you insist, Gar, so long as you give me proof, not just a fancy theory "

(Gar, reading this in manuscript, insisted that I here insert a Challenge to the Reader. So consider yourself challenged.)

The revelation of the iden-

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tity of a killer should be a moment of high drama, with all the suspects tense and wary, in awe of The Great Detective who juggles clues and alibis omnisciently. But that's not the way it happened.

The three suspects just paraded back into the office in a tired manner. Clay and Frank were carrying parts of their costumes, and Alice was wringing her hands like Lady Macbeth. Gar was growing uncomfortable from the heat, but he still managed to retain the dignity that he said his hero, The Batman, would have had in similar circumstances.

"Now," said Gar, when everyone was seated. "A few facts:

"Fact: Herb O'Sergius, editor of *Might Master*, was murdered in a closet just off the Banquet Hall by repeated blows to the skull. Who killed him? Well, someone with what must have been—at least to the murderer—a very good reason. Envy, for instance, of Herb's winning a prestigious fan award that the killer thought *he* deserved; of greed—of Herb's possession of one-third of the very profitable *Might Master* character; or fear—of Herb's threat to institute divorce proceedings. Any of these emotions, plus the added stimulus of too much alcohol, would have provided enough motivation for murder. The hate had doubtless been there a long time, and the Comiconvention simply provided the opportunity.

"So the killer did the dirty work, and the body was discovered. And what was one of the first things said by an investigator?

"I quote: 'Someone certainly did a job on him.' And Lieutenant Jacobs replied, 'Someone certainly did, Ms. Ashwin—blood was spattered over everything during the fight.' They were referring, of course, to the fact that the victim had been attacked savagely by his killer—an attack that left blood over the floor and the weapon."

I was going to ask Gar why he hadn't mentioned the dying message, but decided against it. If I interrupted one of his deductive dissertations there would be no living with him.

"You see," Gar continued, "I was so caught up in the dramatic possibilities of a psychological clue left by the victim that I forgot there was also a *physical* clue. As the lieutenant said, blood was spattered over everything. The floor, the weapon, the victim—so why not the killer? He must have had blood over him, too.

"And where did that lead? Well, if the killer *did* have blood

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over him, why didn't we see it? Why didn't it stand out? Logic, therefore, demanded that we look for someone whose costume would not show bloodstains—and that could only be a costume that is red.

"Frank, your costume is mainly light gray, despite your name of The Red Skull. Alice, your Crimson Girl costume is predominantly white. So that left only one suspect—a man whose costume *is* all red—and would not have shown bloodstains. Any questions, Mr. Scarlet?"

Clay O'Sergius lowered his eyes and massaged his temples as if he had a migraine headache.

"I checked the list of persons here, Clay," said Gar relentlessly. "No one else wore a costume that was all red. Yours was the only one."

Clay continued to stare at the floor. "I have nothing to say."

Gar shrugged. "It makes no difference. Bloodstains will be found on your costume and that should be enough evidence to satisfy Lieutenant Jacobs."

"Do you think he planned it that way?" I asked Gar later.

"The murder?" said Gar. "With the red costume and all?"

"Yes."

"I don't think so. Probably it just worked out that way. Lucky, but unlucky, too."

"But why didn't you solve the dying message, Gar?"

"I couldn't, Karen," he said. "It was just too vague to *be* solved. But Herb must have meant Clay, and we got him, so what's the difference?"

"I solved it."

"How *could* you?" he almost shouted. "There was no way!"

"There certainly was," I replied. It would do him good to be taken down a peg. "Look. I realized that if Herb wanted to indicate his brother Frank, the artist, all he had to do was simply grab the Heroman statuette. Frank designed it, you know."

Gar grinned foolishly. "Forgot."

"A good detective never forgets. And if Herb wanted to tell us it was his wife Alice, what better clue than to simply take off and hold his wedding band?"

Gar grimaced this time.

"And," I concluded, "since he didn't implicate either of them, but wanted us to concentrate on 'red,' the only suspect left was his brother Clay."

For a few moments Gar didn't say anything. Then: "You know, Karen, I overlooked those points completely.

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But your solution doesn't include any legal proof, the way mine does and the way Jacobs insisted. Besides, a good lawyer could easily have established reasonable doubt in court."

And he had the nerve to say that with a straight face. "*You* can talk!" I exclaimed. "You've used flimsier solutions than *that* before! I've *heard* you, Gardner Frost!"

"Well," he answered smugly, "circumstances usually dictate methods, Karen, and—"

"Never mind. I'll save you the embarrassment of justifying your unforgivable lapse in this case."

He was silent for a while. "I'm too wound up to sleep," he said finally. "What do you say to a walk in Central Park?"

"At this hour?"

"Why not? What mugger is going to attack The Batman and Batgirl?"

As it happened, no one did.

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE HARDCOVERS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
Burley, W. J.	DEATH IN A SALUBRIOUS PLACE	Walker & Co.	$5.95	4/73
Everitt, Bridget	A COLD FRONT	Walker & Co.	4.95	4/73
Franklin, Eugene	BOLD HOUSE MURDERS	Stein & Day	5.95	4/20
Stubbs, Jean	DEAR LAURA	Stein & Day	6.95	4/11

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THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

Two detective novels, one spy story, one cops-and-robbers chronicle landing its sneak punch before the bell. That's the tally; let your mentor begin with yet another personal confession.

When lack of worthy new books compels me to recommend an old one, I don't mind. Conscience will squirl, hoot, or gibber only when the old book in question is not readily available. With ten more Agatha Christie titles now issued in paperback, conscience can remain quiet. And there has been no evasive waffling about "suspense." Apart from some few novels without famous sleuth, each Poirot or Miss Marple adventure is honorably called a murder mystery, as it ought to be.

Of Hercule Poirot, "I'm sick of the little blighter!" his *creatrix* remarked one night at dinner. It startles me to recall that she said this fully thirty-five years ago. No doubt she has since become reconciled; we others have liked and admired the Belgian with the moustaches since his first appearance in 1920.

Among ten titles reissued, Dame Agatha's *Third Girl* (Pocket Books, 95¢) claims pride of place because it must rank with the best. Norma Restarick, who can't be sure whether or not she committed a murder, first calls on Poirot and then bolts away into hiding. Does the secret concern Norma's wealthy father, her new stepmother, old Sir Roderick Horsefield, or the loutish young artist she may marry? What of the two girls with whom she shares a flat, or of one victim fallen to death from the seventh floor? Aided by Mrs. Ariadne Oliver, that eminent writer, Poirot sifts clues in yet another victory for the little gray cells.

Don't be alarmed at the heavily academic atmosphere of *The Serpent Under It*, by Edith Taylor (Norton, $5.95). This viper (see Shakespeare, as also for the names of the cats) menaces Hoyt College when Anne Redmond, wife of an English instructor, finds Professor Archibald stabbed in that sunlit garden of peace.

Though the author does not spare us the oldest English Department jokes, she provides new jokes too; she provides expert

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plotting and vivid characterization, from faculty to graduate students to interfering females allied with administration. One more murder, poor What'shername's, speeds the action towards its dramatic end. And all the evidence is there.

We must have more campus dirty work from a baffler of such obvious talent. In non-academic terms, let it firmly be stated, Miss Taylor has plenty of class.

For those of us who lived in England not only throughout Hitler's War but during those uneasy, espionage-haunted nineteen fifties, *The Spy Trap*, by Burton Graham (Weybright and Talley, $4.95), strikes a reminiscent chord. Mystery has always surrounded the death of Commander Crabb, famous British frogman, who may have got too close to a visiting Russian warship. Modern as today's newspaper, this story harks back.

Michael Evans, cloak-and-dagger brigade, runs slap into attempted murder at every turn. The German popsy of Author's Agent Stringer has promised him a manuscript with the truth about Commander Crabb if he can whisk that manuscript past Soviet Security. Whereupon Evans, Stringer, American Newswoman Sara Collins, a Russian defector, and sinister Kovarsky of sinister Department S thud together at homicidal football with unknown X in the backfield.

Climaxing a wild chase following that last confrontation at the Polish farm, Evans and the Russian defector must batter their way *into* East Germany before they can get out again, which suitably concludes this first novel of promise already fulfilled.

In *A Matter of Confidence*, by Brad Williams and J. W. Erlich (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, $4.95), professional writer and formidable courtroom lawyer have produced mystery-adventure loaded with high explosive. The jade chess set smuggled out of Red China for Millionaire Antoine Straus may or may not be Persian masterwork more than a thousand years old. Death and destruction follow at once.

The flavor of San Francisco's Chinatown drifts through each incident like fog from the bay, bedevilling attorney Sam Benedict. In court Sam must prove that the shooting of Johnnie Wung was no murder; out of court he must show who strangled the airline hostess at the Airline Hotel. Despite mayhem and arson from young hoods uncontrolled by the Chinese Six Companies, proof seems elusive until a certain person's mask drops during a burst of gun play at the end. First class.

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a NEW story by

GERALD WEALES

Gerald Weales's only appearance in EQMM was nearly 15 years ago, in our October 1958 issue. Too long, much too long, to wait for an encore—as this beautifully written second story proves . . .

THE COUNTRY OF SILENCE

by GERALD WEALES

Picture One. 1940. Studio Portrait. A slim man, almost elegant in his morning coat. The face, soft, good-looking in a conventional way. Mandatory smile, but genuine, with a hint of triumph. In the eyes? Distance? Bewilderment? The photographer's lights? On the man's arm, an armful. A prettily plump girl, a bridal gown well filled with fleshly promise. The face, a beaming pudding. The eyes, clear, direct. No, not cold. Not exactly. The left hand clutching a bouquet of strangled summer flowers.

Picture Two. 1971. Snapshot. Unposed. On the lawn. A small man, almost lost in a rumpled coat sweater. The face, soft, lined, nondescript. The mouth, tightly closed, protected—a little—by a slight mustache on the upper lip. In the eyes? Distance? Bewilderment? The sun? On the man's left, an institution. A large woman, a housedress stuffed with angles, points, sharp edges. The face, an open-mouthed accusation. The eyes, lethal. The right hand brandishing a bunch of summer flowers.

Nelson Appleton was not a contemplative man. He was quiet, the Lord knows, but it would never have occurred to him (had the neighbor who took the snapshot been unkind enough to pass it on) to wonder how he—they—had got from Picture One to Picture Two. There was no room for autobiography, no place for analysis in the zone of silence into

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which he retreated when his wife began to wrap him in her web of complaint.

As for Edwina Appleton, she would have recognized neither of the people in the photographs. She knew only and always that she was the victim, helplessly trapped in the world of Nelson's aggression, beset by cigar ashes (Nelson did not smoke), obscenity (Nelson did not swear), and insatiable sensual demands (Nelson did not, or if he did, not at home).

"When I think what I've had to go through," Edwina would say, as she stood waiting for the toast to burn, "what I've had to put up with all these years," she would say, slamming Nelson's coffee down in front of him, slopping it over the edge of the cup, filling the saucer, "so many years," she would go on, dropping into her chair, "a fat lot you care, you ungrateful beast, look at you, look at the way you go on, put down that paper for heaven's sake, can't you see I'm talking to you, other women," she would say, as Nelson folded the paper and left it on the table, "some other women have husbands," she would say, as Nelson found his hat and brief case, "husbands who show a little concern, a mod—" she would say, as Nelson closed the door "—icum of concern for their wives," she would say, as the door opened again at 6:15, "men who appreciate . . . who do . . . who think . . . who are genu—" she would say, passing in and out of the kitchen, putting the casserole on the table, "but no, not me, no, I had to get stuck with a man whose only concern—eat, for heaven's sake—whose only concern—I didn't work over a hot stove so that you could pick at your food like some stupid bird," she would say, snatching away his plate as his fork hovered over it, "a bird-brain whose only concern," she would go on, settling in front of the television, "his own selfish pleasures," she would say through the commercial, "his own precious little self," she would say through the program, "if I had it all to do over again," she would say as she turned off the television just as the news came on, "I would certainly never," she would say on the stairs, "get trapped by a selfish creature like you," she would say, turning out the light, "when I think," she would go on, ignoring the first faint whistle of escape from the sleeping man.

No one who watched Nelson slumping at the breakfast table, crumpled at the dinner table, propped up in front of the

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television, staring through the screen, the set, the wall beyond, could have guessed that he had found companions in the country of silence where he lived most of the time. "Mindless daydreaming," Edwina called it, and so it seemed. Until the boy arrived.

It was a chilly late-spring evening. The Appletons were in their usual places—her armchair, his straight-backed one—in the living room. The television was turned on to a variety show, celebrated for its wit and high ratings, and Edwina's monologue rode relentlessly across the introductory patter, the cute orchestrations, the frenzy of the stand-up comic. Suddenly, incredibly, Nelson spoke.

"Are you comfortable?" he asked, looking at the footstool that stood alongside his chair.

"What?" rasped Edwina. "What do you mean, am I comfortable?"

"Oh," said Nelson. He looked at his wife as though he had just now become aware she was in the room. He smiled. "I wasn't talking to you."

A silence. A brief one, while she studied his face for signs of malevolence. Then, mincingly, "To *whom* were you speaking?"

"Roger."

"Who?"

"Roger." He nodded toward the footstool.

"Are you crazy? There's no one there."

Nelson smiled at the footstool. In complicity. He tossed his head slightly, gesturing toward Edwina, and shrugged. Then he winked at the footstool. "Shall we take a walk?"

"Are you crazy, it's cold out."

"That's all right, we'll wear our coats. Won't we, Roger?"

As Edwina stared, silenced, he took his topcoat from the hall closet and put it on. He opened the door and held it for an instant, just long enough for an active boy to slip by, before he went out and closed the door behind him.

At breakfast Nelson tried to feed the boy. He broke a corner off a piece of toast and held it out, nodding encouragingly at the empty air just beyond his hand.

"Well!" shouted Edwina. "Well!" She pointed triumphantly at the unnibbled toast.

Nelson continued to look into the air, a hint of pleading in his eyes, and then a smile of understanding touched his lips. He nodded in agreement and put the toast back on his plate. He turned to Edwina, his voice, his manner passing easily through her armor of smugness. "You know, I don't think the boy likes burned toast."

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At dinner Nelson pulled an extra chair up to the table and, when Edwina refused, he set a place for the boy himself.

"Everything all right?" Nelson asked the empty chair as they settled at the table.

"There's no one there, dammit," snarled Edwina.

"Don't swear in front of the boy." An unfamiliar sharpness touched Nelson's voice.

"I tell you there's no one there." This time a querulous whine crept into Edwina's assurance.

Nelson ignored her. As the dinner went on he kept offering bits from his fork to the boy. None were eaten, but the smiles, the assenting nods, the friendly words, the little jokes flowed from Nelson toward—toward something; and judging by Nelson's conviviality, there was a response.

Edwina muttered into her food. ". . . nothing there . . . crazy . . . ought to be locked up," but she found it difficult to take her eyes off the empty chair. Finally she became silent, ate mechanically. At one point, when Nelson lapsed into baby talk, she snapped, "Well, how old is that boy anyway?"

"About ten, I'd say." He turned toward the chair. "Ten, Roger?" Back to Edwina. "About ten."

"Then what's all that icky-bicky-boo nonsense? Who talks that way to a ten-year-old?"

"It's our little joke," he explained. He grinned at the chair, listened a moment, then broke into a pleased laugh.

After dinner Nelson and the boy decided to take another walk.

"Why don't you come with us?" Nelson asked.

"I'm not crazy," Edwina answered. She turned her back on the question, the set of her shoulders rejecting Nelson, his ideas, his invisible friend. She plopped into her chair and stared with unfamiliar absorption at the television screen, but as soon as the door closed she flipped the set off and began to prowl the room, straightening knickknacks that were not out of place. Finally she hunkered on Nelson's chair and waited for the walk to end.

Nelson burst in, flushed and laughing. "We ran the last block," he panted. "Am I out of condition!" He shook his head and puffed out a tiny whistle of resignation. "Still, I gave him a run for his money." He looked at a patch of carpet just inside the living-room door. "Didn't I, boy?"

"Oh, God," moaned Edwina.

"That's all right, dear," Nelson assurred her. "I'll get back

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in shape. I'll need to, to keep up with Roger."

Heavily, Edwina got to her feet and started to move toward the door. Nelson stopped her. "We've got to do something about a bed for the boy."

"A bed?"

He nodded. "To sleep on. You know."

"I know what a bed is," she snarled. "But why does he need one? Where'd he sleep last night?"

"Oh, just around." Nelson waved his hand vaguely. "But we can't have that, can we? A boy that age needs a place of his own."

"Nelson," she said patiently, "he doesn't need a place of his own because he doesn't exist. He isn't here. He isn't real."

"I'll tell you what we can do. We can set the folding bed up in our room."

"I am not going to have that child sleeping in my room," Edwina shouted.

"If he doesn't exist," Nelson said sweetly, "what difference does it make where he sleeps?" He looked at the spot on the rug and began to giggle.

"No," said Edwina. She began to shake her head. "No, no, no!"

"All right." He patted her shoulder, almost fondly. "I'll open that big old leather couch in the dining room. That way he'll have a place of his own and he won't be in your way. Besides," he said to the rug, "a big boy of ten doesn't need to sleep in his daddy's room."

The next evening, after work, Nelson brought a cap pistol home; the night after that, a basketball. The house, particularly the space around Roger's couch, began to fill up with toys. As the spring inched into summer, the toys began to lap out into the yard, and Edwina tried to still the questions in the neighbors' eyes with a complicated story about Nelson's work with underprivileged children.

He *was* gone a good deal of the time. He took Roger to the movies as often as possible, but Edwina refused to go. "I don't like Westerns." He and Roger went to the zoo, without Edwina. "I don't like animals." They went on all-day hikes alone. "I don't like to walk." They went camping on weekends and left Edwina at home. "I don't like insects." Finally, when Nelson's vacation came, they spent two weeks in the Smokies and sent funny postcards back to Edwina. "I don't like mountains."

It was not quite as cozy as it sounds. There were still angry quarrels in which Edwina insisted that there was no Roger,

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there could be no Roger, there never would be a Roger. Attempted quarrels really because as soon as Edwina got on that subject, Nelson called the boy and left the house with him. Except in the middle of the night. Not wanting to disturb the boy, Nelson lay in bed and tried not to listen to Edwina's diagnosis (that he was crazy) and her threats (that she'd have him carted off to the asylum).

Actually it wasn't bad in the summer. Nelson was out of the house so much that Edwina's complaints scarcely bothered him at all. For that matter, Edwina didn't much mind having the boy around as long as she knew she wasn't going to be shut up in the house with him.

Then fall came, winter threatened. Nelson and Roger moved back into the house. In the evenings they took to playing on the couch in the dining room. It was a monster of an old sofa, even when it was closed, big enough for several grown men to crawl around on. Certainly big enough for one small grown man and a child of indeterminate size.

Sometimes it was a besieged castle. Sometimes it was a fort, as in *Beau Geste*, with the brave, doomed defenders fighting to their last shot. Sometimes it was a covered wagon crossing the prairie. Sometimes it was an escape car, outsmarting the cops and carrying the bank loot into the hills. Sometimes it was a racing car, closing in on the leader in the final lap at the Indianapolis 500. Sometimes it was a ship—a U.S. Navy vessel, a freighter in a storm, more likely a pirate frigate.

For Edwina, of course, it was only a couch. And a nuisance. She had had all she could take, she told herself. She had been patient. She had been understanding. She had even—now and then—reluctantly acknowledged the boy's presence. For eight months she had put up with the delusions of poor Nelson. That is what he had become—*poor* Nelson. She could take no more. Something had to be done.

She stood at the kitchen sink one November night, wiping the casserole dish and listening to the voices coming from the dining room, and made a decision. She put the dish in the cupboard, folded the cloth neatly and hung it on the rack beneath the sink. Everything in its place.

Nelson simply had to be committed, she said to herself, that was all there was to it. He had to be told and right now. She paused inside the kitchen door

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"There's a ship on the horizon," Nelson said. "Climb the mast, Black Hand, and see what colors she flies."

Edwina thought she heard another, lighter voice say, "Aye, aye, Cap'n," but her own "Nonsense" scattered that impression. She pushed open the kitchen door.

"Stop," Nelson shouted. He held up his hand in warning. "That's the ocean," he said, pointing at the dining-room rug.

Edwina snorted. "Nonsense," she said again and stepped onto the rug.

She sank without a trace.

"Q"

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a NEW detective story by

H. R. F. KEATING

Who can resist a story titled "The Butler Did It"? Who can resist a story about a twelve-and-a-half-year-old girl detective? If you can't, then meet Melanie and join her in shadowing Mr. Froggett of The Lodge, Hollanby Court, Norfolk . . .

THE BUTLER DID IT

by H. R. F. KEATING

The British butler exists. Of course, examples are hard to find in these democratic days, even in the depths of the English countryside. Yet on the one occasion that Melanie, midway between her twelfth and thirteenth birthdays, met such a phenomenon she was, as it happened, properly ready for the encounter. A year earlier, in her horses period, it would have meant nothing: a butler lacks a soft, nuzzling, and breathy nose. And if the encounter had taken place just three months earlier, during Melanie's bloodthirsty period, when she demanded for breakfast every morning (without success) rich juicy red kidneys—well, what might have happened then scarcely bears thinking about.

But, as it was, at twelve and one-half Melanie was just in the first flush of delight over the immortal works of Dame Agatha Christie, Miss Dorothy L. Sayers, and other hardly lesser lights of the classic "whodunit." One by one with fearful speed their citadels were falling to her all-devouring eyes, and of course in most of them there was a butler. So when she discovered, having gone with her parents to The Lodge, Hollanby Court, Norfolk, which the eighth baronet, less affluent than his seven predecessors, rented out as a holiday home, that there was a real live butler at the main house, her somewhat lonely life became all at once pure heaven.

People at The Lodge had access to the grounds of Hollanby Court, and so Melanie spent

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hour after long summer hour lurking in the overgrown, acid-smelling shrubbery and waiting for the butler, whose name she had learned at the gossipy village shop was Mr. Froggett.

Each time Mr. Froggett went shopping in the village, Melanie would track him from clump of pampas grass to clump of pampas grass, from immemorial urn to immemorial urn, all along the driveway of the main house, and then from bush to bush and tree to tree along the lane. And Mr. Froggett admirably lived up to the reputation Miss Sayers and Dame Agatha had bestowed upon him. When he walked, he progressed. When he deposited rubbish in the dustbin, he inclined. And he wore a striped waistcoat. It bellied out in full sail in front of him, and Melanie, when she tried to picture him at night (when the murder would be done), saw him wearing it even in august and dignified sleep.

And then, after only a week of the holiday, the murder was done. The eighth baronet was hit on the head with a blunt instrument, and in The Lodge's library. And the famous *Hollanby Magicarum*, a unique tome detailing the activities of a lot of early Jacobean witches, was found to be missing. It seemed it had been the only item of value left in the house that the eighth baronet had shared with Froggett, his one remaining servant.

Melanie, who had never seen the deceased and so was happily unrestrained, felt this was bliss upon bliss. No sooner had she sucked in all the details at the buzzing village shop than she made up her mind to investigate the affair herself, urged on rather than discouraged by the fact that apparently "the Yard" had been called in. It was only when she was within twenty yards of the wide front door of Hollanby Court that she came to an abrupt halt, like a bumbly hunting puppy confronted suddenly by a spitting, back-arched tomcat.

How exactly does an amateur detective begin? Melanie stood stock-still in the rutted drive under the equable summer sun. It was unfair. Scotland Yard had all the advantages. Its Inspectors could just go up to Mr. Froggett (because Melanie had no doubt that the butler had done it) and start asking questions. And theirs wouldn't be half as inspired as hers.

So, reduced to watching from the branch of a spreading, dark green, piny-smelling cedar tree beside the drive, Melanie had to endure seeing in due course the actual arrival of two men from the Yard. As they waited to be let in she was able

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to observe them in galling detail. There was a tall, distant-seeing man who must be the Superintendent. He looked, Melanie thought, just like the police detective ought to look: stupid. He had a considerable protruding stomach, indicating lack of imagination, and in the middle of his large reddish face there was a small, scrubby ginger mustache, plainly betraying lack of drive. His companion, the sergeant of course, was a man of about 50 with a nut-brown complexion; he was carrying a heavier leather bag and looked as if he could hardly wait to get home again.

Melanie watched Mr. Froggett let them in, noting that the butler was successfully keeping up the appearance of total, striped-waistcoat innocence. And then she resigned herself to await developments. None came. She left her post eventually for a late, scrambled, parent-disregarding lunch, but when she got back the big shabby house was still slowly cooking and crinkling in the sun and still nothing was happening.

At about four, when she was almost ready to quit detection altogether in favor of tea and taking the bus to nearby Borwick-on-sea for a swim, an ambulance drove up and within a short time its crew emerged from the house carrying something on a stretcher. The sad and awful burden was whisked quickly away and in a moment it was as if it had never been; but Melanie's detective career was almost ended. Indeed, it would have been had not the door of the main house immediately opened again. The Superintendent and the sergeant were leaving, seen off the premises by Mr. Froggett. In an instant Melanie forgot everything else.

So he had got away with it! The stupid police still believed the crime was the work of a gang that had broken in. The Superintendent at that moment confirmed it. Ducking to get into his car, he called out cheerfully to Mr. Froggett, "The Hollanby Arms in Borwick, if you should want us." The fool! The blithering fool! To be sitting in a seaside hotel when all the time the man who had done it was there for the arresting.

Melanie was about to go back home in sheer disgust when the wide front door opened again and Mr. Froggett himself came out. But he was a changed Mr. Froggett. And not only because his striped waistcoat was covered up by an old mackintosh (when there was absolutely no sign of rain) but because there was something distinctly different in his manner. He no longer progressed as he set off along the

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drive. If he did not actually slink, he did something not far from it, hurrying along at a fierce pace and darting glances from side to side as if, were anybody to come toward him, he would instantly fling himself behind one of the clumps of pampas grass.

But Melanie, with her acquired skill in shadowing, did not find it hard to follow him. He led her, not to the village, but to the bus stop for Borwick. And when in a few minutes the bus came, Melanie (thanking her lucky stars she had some money on her) went bravely up and boarded it at his heels.

In Borwick the butler set off once more at a cracking pace, again casting quick glances from side to side as if anxious above all not to be seen by anybody who might know him. Melanie marched off as ostentatiously as she could in the opposite direction, and then, the moment she was out of sight, ran as fast as she could around the block. She was just in time, red-faced and panting, to pick up the trail.

It led her away from the brave front of the town to a rundown area of narrow streets and small mean houses. And there, quite suddenly, Mr. Froggett dived in at the doorway of a little shop. After a moment Melanie decided to cross the street and nip quickly past on the far side. But even before she had drawn level she was able to see that Mr. Froggett had been admitted into a back room.

Melanie stopped and looked across at the shop. Exactly what sort of place it was she could not at first make out. In its little dusty windows there were two piled pyramids of what seemed to be old jam jars filled with grayish green leaves of various sorts. Then there was a stuffed owl, a few books, and three crystal balls of different sizes.

It was not until she looked up at the almost illegible sign that she realized the shop provided full confirmation of all her suspicions. *Madame Zara*, the sign read; *Herbal Cures, Magical Objects, Health Foods.* The very place for anyone wanting to dispose quickly of that valuable but incriminating tome, the *Hollanby Magicarum.*

She knew at once what she must do. She had read about too many screamingly stupid heroines who, having found out who had done it, went and put themselves into deadly perilous situations. She must go at once and ask at the Hollanby Arms for the men from Scotland Yard.

But outside the smooth and moderately magnificent hotel

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she encountered another snag. She just could not see herself going up to the uniformed and beribboned commissionaire and saying out loud, "The gentlemen from Scotland Yard, if you please." She stood and hesitated, feeling herself flushing hard all over. And she might even have followed the example of those screamingly stupid heroines—was this why they did it really?—if she had not suddenly realized that sitting in the garden at the side of the hotel, placidly dealing with a cup of tea under a blue-and-white striped umbrella, was none other than the sergeant.

Thank goodness, she thought. If it had been the Superintendent, with that rather contemptuous look his little ginger mustache gave him, she would not have dared. But the sergeant would be all right. And if she spelled it out clearly enough he would get the hang of the situation.

So she entered the garden, went straight up to him, and told him in one breathless rush who she was and what she wanted to see him about.

"All right then," he said. "You tell me. Always nice to have someone to talk to."

It was not exactly the reception she had expected, but she brought out her whole story of how the robbery at Hollanby Court had really been faked all along. And when she got to the end, explaining about Madame Zara's magic shop, she really did think it all hung together very well. So she was not much put out when she realized that the vague figure that had loomed up behind her about halfway through her story was the Superintendent himself.

When she had finished she saw the sergeant glance up at him with what, she thought in fury, was a glance of apology.

And, yes, "Just been listening to a bit of a tale from this young lady, sir," the sergeant said, pushing himself to his feet. "But I'm right with you."

Melanie would have rushed off there and then, feeling the tears come pricking into her eyes, but the Superintendent stopped her.

"No, wait a minute," he said with a sort of quiet authority.

Then he turned to the sergeant.

"Tell me," he said to him, "what's the one thing we've been asking ourselves ever since that Froggett fellow told us he hadn't got any local friends?"

The sergeant looked back stiffly.

"Just where the break-in mob got hold of their top-grade info about the house, sir," he said.

"Exactly, Sergeant. And I

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think this young lady has just supplied us with the answer. You remember we were joshing the locals about how little crime they had down here, and one of them boasted that at least they'd got a witches' coven. Run from a shop, he said it was. Well, that gives us what we've been looking for."

He gave a little twitch to his gingery mustache.

"Yes," he said, "no doubt our Mr. Froggett liked a spot of black magic fun-and-games, on the q.t. of course. And he'd have certainly told the whole coven about the *Hollanby Magicarum*. Well, you always get one or two rum'uns in a setup like that. So there's where we go to look for our break-in merchant who happened to go a bit too far."

He turned to Melanie.

"Thank you very much," he said.

And then he must have seen the mixed emotions that she felt chasing each other across her face. Because, as he made his way off to the street, he added a last comment.

"And, you know," he said, "you were really quite right all along. Without your Mr. Froggett none of this business would have ever happened. So it's perfectly true to say: the butler did it."

EDITORIAL COMMENT: How do detective stories get born? Here is an anecdote that reveals the origin, the proximate cause, the creative impulse that triggered the story you have just read. H. R. F. Keating and Julian Symons, two of the best-known of contemporary English mystery writers, were discussing crime and crime fiction on a TV program. Mr. Symons remarked that one of the things which annoyed him most was the number of times someone, on hearing Mr. Symons' profession, said, "Oh, yes, I know, you write the sort of books where the butler did it." Mr. Keating responded by saying, meant only as a joke, that he was going to write a story that very night in which the butler did it. Well, it didn't happen that very night—but Mr. Keating couldn't get the thought out of his head. He became possessed by it, and finally to exorcise the idea, he wrote the story. So you see, it wasn't the butler; it was the author who did it.

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a *NEW* story of crime and detection by

PATRICIA McGERR

"If there's a thin line between a saint and a fool, Ruth walked very close to that line."

An engrossing crime-detective story in which service-station owner, Nathan Sprague—good old steady, hard-working, dependable Nate—found himself in a most unusual situation. What would you *have done in Nate Sprague's position? We warn you, it won't be an easy decision . . .*

NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH

by PATRICIA McGERR

That Sunday was, in its beginning, no different from any other Sunday. I got up about 7:30 and put the coffee on to boil while I shaved and dressed. Then I had my usual breakfast—corn flakes and milk, toast with grape jelly, and coffee. I was finishing the second cup when the bell rang to let me know that a car was driving into the service station.

I hurried down the stairs, through the office, and out to the pumps. It was a '69 Pontiac with out-of-state tags and it took 12.8 gallons of high test. I entered the sale in my log, noting the time as 8:15, then went back to my living quarters to make the bed and wash the dishes.

It was kind of chilly for the end of April, so I pulled a sweater on over my work shirt. With the chores done, I settled down in the office to tot up the week's receipts and write an order for the supplies I needed for the month ahead.

Business is always slow on Sunday mornings. My station is at the junction of State Highway 40 and the road to Morristown. That's a town in name only—a two-block business district surrounded by farms—and the people don't do much Sunday gadding. It's a good day for paperwork and I finished with

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only two interruptions, both from the highway. A '66 Mercury took 12 gallons of regular and a '63 Volks wanted directions to a turnoff he'd missed a mile and a half back.

I was putting the order into its envelope when I heard the first car on the Morristown road. By the sound it was traveling faster than is safe or legal on the two-lane gravel surface that is still as winding as the cowpath that provided its original design. There's a stand of timber behind my station, so I can't see vehicles till they're almost here. This one hardly slowed for the turn into the station and pulled up beside the pumps with tires screeching. It was Chad Bascom in his '72 Chevy.

"Fill 'er up, Gimpy," he said.

I walked to the back of the car with the heat starting someplace near the bottom of my stomach and rising in waves to the top of my head. My fingers were unsteady when I unscrewed the top of his gas tank and I was afraid, when I set the nozzle down, he'd hear the clatter and get satisfaction from knowing he'd pushed me once more to blind and trembling rage.

You'd think that after twenty years I'd be immune to Bascom's insults, that a single word, so often repeated, would have lost its power to send my blood pressure soaring. I stood still while three gallons flowed through the hose and while I built a fantasy of lighting a match and bringing gas and flame together to turn his car into a fiery coffin. Then, as the throbbing in my temples eased, I picked up the spray bottle and paper towels and cleaned his back window. When that was done I did the same to the front, keeping my lips tight-pressed to hold back an answer to anything he might say. But today, for a change, he didn't keep on riding me, just sat in stony silence till I was forced to speak.

"Check under the hood?" I asked.

"The way you move," he snapped, "that would take all day. Put the lid on and let me out of here."

The pump cut off at 13.2. I squeezed out a few more drops to make it an even $5 and capped his tank. He thrust a $5 bill at me and had the car moving almost before I could step out of the way. I went into the office, put the money in the register, looked at the clock on my desk, and entered it in the log: "10:10—13.2 regular—$5."

Then I stood at the window and watched Chad Bascom's car head north on the highway.

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There's a straight stretch of almost a mile with good visibility, but even after he was out of sight I still stood there with my eyes on the white-lined asphalt. Going to the city, I thought, on his way to a good time—with Ruth, predictably, left behind.

I wasn't really seeing the highway. My thoughts, as always after an encounter with Chad, turned inward. Gimpy he'd called me and gimpy he'd made me. Time had honed my anger to a bitter edge and my hatred now had a depth and hardness that would have been beyond my capabilities at the time it happened.

I was a year out of Ag College then and had put my savings into the old Mullen place. The mortgage payments were manageable, the spring weather benign, and a good crop would have permitted me to buy a tractor and modernize the kitchen. After the harvest Ruth Hadley and I were going to be married. We weren't engaged—folks in our community don't formalize things that way; but ever since high school it was taken for granted that as soon as I was able to make my own way and had a place to take her, it would be Ruthie and me for life. Nobody had to tell me how lucky I was.

Ruth wasn't the prettiest girl in our class. Thelma Frankes, with her blonde curls and china-blue eyes, had that distinction. But in any group it was Ruth your eyes kept coming back to. Her dark brown hair had a sheen that caught the play of light and shadow. Her eyes were brown too and held a glint of humor that even her most serious mood couldn't quite vanquish. What held attention, though, was her sheer aliveness, the sense she passed to all around of a deep and bubbling joy.

I never knew what she saw in me. I was that nice Sprague boy. Good old Nate Sprague. Steady, honest, hard-working, dependable. All the adjectives were dull. But Ruth looked at me as if we shared a wonderful secret. And I could never look at her without a sense of inner singing. Not in those days.

That June was the fifth reunion of our high-school graduating class. We met in the gym and danced to records and reminisced. There were platters loaded with sandwiches and a bowl of punch made from grape juice blended with ginger ale. Chad Bascom's class was holding its tenth reunion in the cafeteria. Late in the evening he crossed the hall to the gym. I was dancing with Ruth when I noticed him first. He was standing near the door looking over

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the crowd with something in his expression that was like a cattleman at an auction. I wondered whom he was looking for and then forgot him until a few moments later I felt a sharp rap on my shoulder.

"Cutting in, partner," he said.

That's an alien custom in our county. When we bring a girl to a party we dance with her all evening. Or maybe, if two or three couples come together, we trade off a few dances within the group. But Chad was an older man with big-city ways. I looked at Ruth and she gave her little what's-it-matter shrug, so I let him dance with her.

At the time it didn't seem important. I leaned against the wall and watched them. Together they made a very pretty picture. Like him or not, no one could deny Chad's handsomeness. He was big, well over six feet, with rock-hard muscles. And he was a far better dancer than I. Ruth's natural rhythm matched his and they seemed to float across the floor as a single body.

"Better watch out, Nate." A classmate stopped beside me, only half kidding. "That Bascom's a grade-A wolf."

I knew Chad's reputation, but it didn't worry me. I was too sure of Ruthie. When the dance ended he kept his arm around her and guided her to the refreshment table. I followed and saw him fill two paper cups from a pint bottle he took from his back pocket.

"This'll put back our bounce," he said.

"No, thank you," she refused politely. "I'd rather have punch."

"Punch with no punch in it." He pushed his own brew toward her. "Come on, baby, live a little."

I went to the bowl, ladled punch into a cup, and carried it to Ruth. Chad gave me an ugly look.

"Don't crowd me, youngster," he said. "I'm taking care of the lady."

I tried to ignore him and offered her the cup. He knocked it out of my hand and purple drops spattered her white linen dress. She looked frightened. Chad, I realized, had already drunk most of his pint.

"Let's go home, Nate," she said.

"Yes, sure." I moved to her side, but Chad put the flat of his hand on my chest and pushed me away.

"Stay out of this, small fry," he warned. "I said I'd take care of the lady." He took Ruth's arm, tightening his hold as she tried to pull away. "I'll see you home, baby, by the longest way round."

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I sprang at him with a fist that was aimed at his chin but landed on his shoulder. His surprise and my momentum nearly knocked him off balance, but my advantage was brief. He was four inches taller and 40 pounds heavier. Almost before I knew it I was on the floor with a feeling that the room was rocking like a boat on rough water. He nudged my side with the steel-tipped toe of his boot.

"Get up, boy," he ordered. "I got some more things to show you."

I tried to raise my head and focus my eyes. Chad drew back his foot and kicked me with stunning force. The last thing I saw was his mouth stretched in an exultant grin.

I was in the hospital for five months. The hip bone was shattered and at first it looked as if I'd spend the rest of my life on crutches. Twice Ruth drove 90 miles to visit me. The first time I asked her not to come again. The second time I had the doctor tell her that seeing her was bad for my morale. That was true. I'd been shamed in front of her and I couldn't stand being reminded of that or of all that I'd so nearly had and lost.

Later they moved me to a hospital in another state where there was a surgeon especially skilled in bone grafts. The operation was successful and I came home almost as good as new, except that my left leg was two inches shorter than my right.

While I was healing, my neighbors pitched in to save my crop. And the county sheriff had a long talk with Chad. He offered him a choice—pay my medical bills or face trial on assault charges. As a result I left the hospital in fair financial condition. But a farmer needs to work on two good legs. So I sold my land and made a down payment on this gas station. With the second story fixed up as a small apartment it makes a good enough living for a man alone.

Since Ruth and I weren't formally engaged, there was nothing to break off. I kept away from her and when her mother called or her friends came round I told them it was over and Ruth should forget me. A woman like Ruth deserves a whole man and I just couldn't take her pity. Chad moved quickly to fill the vacuum and those same friends described the smoothness of his operation.

When sober and trying, Chad could display great charm. He came to her first with profuse apologies for his behavior while under the influence. He let her know that he was taking care of my medical expenses, but he

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carefully neglected to mention Sheriff Crane's alternative. He took her to movies and dances and was always a perfect gentleman. He won her mother with flattery and her younger brother with presents. He told her he loved her and needed her and wanted nothing in life so much as to make her happy.

Six months after I began living above my service station, Ruth became Mrs. Chad Bascom.

I tried not to hate him. A man shouldn't be held responsible for what he does when he's drunk. I had been a fool to stand up to him. He hadn't taken Ruth from me, I'd given her up. Those were the things I told myself to hold down the bile that surged up at the thought of him. After a while I was able, most of the time, to put him out of my mind.

He seldom patronized my station and I seldom left the premises. It was painful going out among my old friends with things so changed and I had everything I needed right at home. The weekly bookmobile supplied plenty of reading material, and daily banter with my customers was sufficient social life. So I was a long time learning how things really were between Ruth and Chad.

I heard a few things. People who came by the station dropped hints that he was giving her a bad time. They told stories about his jealousy, how he raged if she smiled too brightly at another man. Some even said he beat her, that they'd seen bruises on her face and arms. But I know how easily gossip starts in a small town and how quickly it can grow. I didn't encourage them to talk and dismissed their tales as puffed-up versions of the normal crises in married life. Perhaps, I told myself, they were exaggerating on purpose, thinking it would cheer me to believe the marriage had turned sour. Then Ruth's mother began to call me and I discovered the reports weren't exaggerated at all—they were actually toned down.

Mrs. Hadley and I had been close in the early days. My own mother died when I was 13 and in high school and when I was eating more dinners at the Hadley house than at home, I had started to call her Ma. She seemed to like it and joked sometimes about my being the first young man to choose a mother-in-law ahead of a wife.

For the first few years after the marriage I didn't hear from her. Then Ruth's brother went off to college and Mrs. Hadley's arthritis got so bad she couldn't go out much. I guess that gave us a special bond—both alone,

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both crippled. Anyway, she began to phone and tell me her worries. Mostly they had to do with Chad's treatment of Ruth.

"Ruthie doesn't tell me half of it," she said. "She tries to pretend everything's all right. But I've seen her eyes red and puffy with crying. Sometimes there are black and blue marks she can't hide. And I've heard him yell at her as if she were his servant. Remember, Nathan, how bright and pretty she always was? You wouldn't know her now."

Others too spoke of these changes. Ruth had lost her looks and her vitality, and she seemed to care little about her appearance. Chad no longer had cause for jealousy, but that didn't improve his temper. Instead he berated her for being such a poor stick that no other man would look at her. It was as if he'd set out deliberately to break her spirit and then, having succeeded, made the deterioration that he caused another mark against her. He used it too as excuse for infidelity.

He drove often to the city, sometimes stayed two or three days. The rumor was he had a woman there. On his return he'd be more cruel than ever to Ruth, as if that was a way of working off his guilt.

I didn't want to hear these things, but I couldn't endure not knowing either. One of the worst times was after her miscarriage. She was in the hospital for nearly a week and Mrs. Hadley was barely coherent when she told me about it.

"He hit her in the stomach," she sobbed. "A woman four months pregnant! Now she can't have children, the doctor says. But maybe that's a blessing. It's bad enough what he's done to my girl, but to see an innocent little one at his mercy —who could bear it? You should have married her, Nathan." It was the nearest she ever came to reproach me. "When you turned away from her he was there. And none of us saw the brute inside him."

Ruth's friends tried to persuade her to leave him. Some thought he should be sent to jail and Sheriff Crane went to the hospital to ask if she was willing to bring charges. But she gave everyone the same answer. Chad was her husband. She'd promised to honor and obey him for better or for worse and she was bound, whatever he did, by that promise. If there's a thin line between a saint and a fool, Ruth Bascom walked very close to that line.

A peculiar thing happened after that. Chad began coming more and more often to my service station. Some perverse streak seemed to make him

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want to draw me into the orbit of their discontent. The purchase of a few gallons of gas bought him the right to rail at his wife's misery and my helplessness.

"You ought to give me a discount," he said once. "That gimp leg of yours cost me a packet. Maybe you think your girl was my payoff. Boy, was I ever fooled! You should come out some time and see the sourpuss bag of bones she's turned into. Could it be you knew something I didn't?"

I learned to say nothing, not even to look at him, just to fill his tank, take his money, and pretend not to hear his taunts. But they got under my skin, every one of them, and grated long after he was gone. Sometimes he thought up small meannesses, like buying just one gallon of gas and asking me to check the battery and all the tires. He watched with a sneering smile as I hobbled and bent my way around the car. "Shake that short leg," he jeered. "I've places to go even if you don't." I gritted my teeth and told myself that if he got the spite out of his system here, maybe he'd take less home to Ruth.

So I felt relieved, that Sunday morning, because he was in and out of the station in such a hurry and with so little to say. I serviced three more cars before going upstairs to make myself a liverwurst sandwich and reheat the coffee. I had just returned to the office when the phone rang. It was Mrs. Hadley.

"Oh, Nathan!" Her voice was strange, low and breathy as if each word was pulled from a deep pit. "Nathan, is that you?"

"Yes, Ma. Is something wrong?"

"You haven't heard yet? Oh, Nathan!"

"What is it? Has something happened to Ruth?"

"My poor girl!" It was a drawn-out wail. "Nathan, he's killed her."

"My God!" Blood rushed to my head and I grasped the edge of the desk to keep from falling. "How—what—"

My disturbance neutralized hers. She told me the story in a flat tone as if it had grown stale with repetition.

"I didn't go to church this morning, my arthritis was that bad. Instead I listened to Pastor Meyer on television. His text was 'Blessed are they who suffer persecution for justice's sake,' and it was beautiful. He could have been talking about Ruthie, I thought, and as soon as he finished I called to tell her what he said. But we only talked for two or three minutes when she said, 'I've got to go now, Ma. Thanks for calling,' in

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that scared voice she uses when he comes into the room and catches her at something he doesn't like. 'I've got to go now, Ma. Thanks for calling.' Those are the last words I'll ever hear her say."

"What did he do to her?" My fingers ached from the tight grip I had on the phone.

"Maybe she told him about Pastor Meyer's sermon." She went on as if she hadn't heard my question. "Maybe she repeated the part about people who suffer in doing their duty and earn a high place in heaven. That might have set off one of his rages. He doesn't like her talking to me anyway. I shouldn't have called. It's my fault what happened."

"What did he do to her?"

"Joachim and Kitty found her." Kitty is Ruth's cousin, but they were as close as sisters. "They drove round that way, thinking if he wasn't home she might like to go to church with them. When they didn't see his car, they went up to the back door. They saw her through the window. She was dead, Nathan. She was already dead. He'd hit her—like he was always hitting her—but this time he broke her neck."

"He was here, Ma." I said the first thing that came into my head, trying to shut out the picture her words made. "He stopped here for gas, then drove off toward the city."

"They'll catch him, Nathan. They'll bring him back and make him pay for what he's done."

"Yes, Ma," I said, "he'll pay."

For a long time after she hung up I sat and stared at the phone as if it might have more to tell me. Dead, I thought. Ruth is dead. All our dreams, all we planned to do together, and this is how it ends. But our dreams and plans were twenty years out of date and what had ended for her was pain and humiliation and despair. I couldn't, in honesty, mourn her death. On an obscure impulse, seeking a share in her last moments, I went to my bookshelf, pulled out my Bible, and opened it to the Sermon on the Mount.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . Blessed are the meek . . . Blessed are they who suffer persecution for justice' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Ruth was poor in spirit. Ruth was meek. Ruth was persecuted. She lived by those words and she died by them. Had she, at the last, found comfort in her mother's quotation from the TV preacher's sermon?

I put the Bible down and my thoughts turned from Ruth to

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Chad. Now I understood his haste, why he didn't play his usual games with me. He had just killed her and was making his escape. His tank was low and he couldn't risk running out of gas on the road. If I had looked at him I might have read what he had done in his face. How long was it, I wondered, between the murder and the time I saw him?

The county paper was on my table. It comes out on Thursdays and carries the television schedule for the week. I spread it out and ran my eyes up the Sunday column till they reached Pastor Meyer's name. He was on, it told me, from 9:30 to 10:00 A.M. So Mrs. Hadley had called Ruth at ten o'clock. And Chad had driven into my station a few minutes later.

It took several seconds for the two facts to meet in my mind and register. It wasn't possible. It couldn't have happened that way, it absolutely couldn't. The Bascom place is 25 miles from here over a very rough and winding road. The best driver, the fastest driver, can't make it in less than 40 minutes. Chad must have left home before the TV program even began.

So Mrs. Hadley had to be mistaken. She'd listened to some other preacher. I looked again at the newspaper schedule. There's only one channel that reaches our area. Its first Sunday program, from 8:00 to 9:00 A.M., was made up of children's cartoons. From 9:00 to 9:30 the Department of Agriculture had a special report. Pastor Meyer's sermon was the only one Ruth's mother could have heard. And my own log proved that Chad left my station with a filled tank at 10:10.

He must have gone back, I reasoned. That's the only answer. He couldn't have been home when Mrs. Hadley phoned Ruth. After he left here he must have remembered something he'd forgotten and circled back. He found Ruth doing something he disapproved—like getting ready to go to church—and struck her down.

It was the only answer, but it wasn't a good one. I remembered how long I'd stood at the window after Chad was out of sight, speeding toward the city. The only road from the highway to his house is the one that goes by my station. And I'm conditioned to be aware of every passing car. How could he have turned round, come back, and gone down that road without my knowing? Especially on Sunday morning when traffic is so light. It could only have happened when I was servicing

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another car, perhaps with my head under the hood.

That theory lasted a short while, till the Kroehler brothers brought in their Ford pickup. It took only 4.4 gallons, so I knew they'd come to find out if I'd heard the news and how I was taking it. I said yes, I'd heard, and didn't tell them any more. But that didn't stop them from sharing the news they'd gathered elsewhere.

Jointly the Kroehlers play the role of town crier. They'd talked to Joachim and learned, among other things, that it was 10:40 when he and Kitty got to the Bascom house. He was sure of the time because the church service began at 11:00 and they were worried about being late. So there was no way that Chad could have made it home ahead of Joachim and Kitty.

For a moment I toyed with the notion that he'd left her dying but not dead, that she'd lived a half hour or so, long enough to receive her mother's call. One of the Kroehlers answered that question without my asking it.

"She died instantly, the doc said," he reported. "Didn't suffer at all, Nate, if that's any consolation to you."

"And Chad will get his just deserts," his brother added. "The sheriff ought to be back with him pretty soon."

"They've caught him?" I asked.

"Sure. He has a woman in the city. The sheriff's known about her for a long time—he doesn't miss many tricks, old Crane doesn't—and he figured that's who he'd run to. The sheriff phoned the city police, they went round and picked him up, and Crane and his deputy drove in to get him. Reckon Chad thought he had more time to plan a getaway. Ordinarily it might have been a day or so before anybody found Ruth's body. Joachim and Kitty stopping by was his bad luck."

I didn't contradict him and a few minutes later they drove away. I went into the office, entered their 4.4 gallons in the log, and gazed at the earlier entry. "10:10—13.2 regular—$5." Chad hadn't killed Ruth and the proof was right in front of me. I realized then that what had borne me up, what had made Ruth's death a tolerable fact, was the belief that it carried the seeds of Chad's destruction. He had at last done something for which he would be punished—punished to the full extent of the law.

Now that prop was pulled from under me. Someone else had murdered Ruth. A stranger, perhaps a tramp. I didn't care who had done it. All that mat-

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tered was that Chad was not guilty and would go free. He was probably lording it over the sheriff right now, showing him up in front of the city police as a hick who went chasing after the wrong man while the right one got away.

I was surprised, therefore, about an hour later to get a call from Sheriff Crane.

"Mrs. Hadley says she called you about Ruth," he began. "A bad business, Nate."

"Yes."

"You told her Chad got gas at your place?"

"That's right."

"Good. I'll be right over to talk to you. Your evidence should fill in the last gap in our case against him."

"You've arrested Chad?"

"Just locked him in the jail." There was grim satisfaction in his tone. "His next stop will be the state prison."

"You still think he did it?"

"Not a doubt in the world."

"But he—he hasn't confessed, has he?"

"Chad? Not a chance! He denied everything and then clammed up. You don't catch him doing anything to make my job easier. See you in a few minutes, Nate."

So Chad was in jail charged with murder. At least he'd have a bad hour or so. Until the sheriff heard my story and went back to set him free. Was I the only one who'd seen him, the only one who could swear he was miles away from home at the time of the murder? God in heaven, I prayed, don't play that kind of trick on me. Don't make me the instrument of Chad's freedom.

Yet there it was in my logbook, in black and white, in my own handwriting—the incontestable proof of his innocence.

But he's not innocent! The protest was thunder in my brain. He's black with guilt. What if he didn't strike the final, fatal blow? What he did to Ruth, day in, day out, was worse than murder. He deserves a murderer's penalty. Everybody in town will agree to that. I'd be nobody's hero if I saved him. So why do it? Why should I give Chad an ironclad alibi?

The more I thought about it, the more right it seemed. Chad had been arrested for Ruth's murder. Without my evidence he would be tried and convicted—not a shadow of doubt about it. All I had to do was fudge the time a little, say it was later when he came to my station. Or perhaps it would be best to be vague. Might have been 10:30, I'd say, or maybe 11:00. It's quiet here on Sunday morning, so I don't pay much attention to what time it is. That way I wouldn't need to

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perjure myself, probably wouldn't even be called as a witness. Chad would be convicted without my saying a word.

I closed the log and pushed it under the order forms in the bottom drawer of my desk. No one even knew I kept a log. There was no reason for anyone else to see it. Twenty years, I told myself. Twenty years since he crippled me and stole my girl. But I mustn't think of that. Not about my own injury. I was seeking retribution for Ruth. That mustn't be tainted with thoughts of personal revenge.

Vengeance is mine, says the Lord, I will repay. The long-forgotten text came unwanted to my mind. But the Lord, I answered, uses human agents. And there's justice, the purest kind of justice, in convicting Chad for Ruth's murder. The person who killed her only stopped her breathing, her suffering. The life that person took today ended many years ago and Chad was the destroyer. He deserves to pay for that and I have no obligation to testify in his defense.

There had been, I realized suddenly, something odd in my conversation with the sheriff. It was Mrs. Hadley who told him about Chad's stopping here for gas. Chad hadn't mentioned it. Why not, I wondered. Ruth was alive when he left home and he knows that I can help establish the time. Why hadn't he said so?

The answer to that was easy. He knows how much I hate him. He's sure I'll never lift a finger to help him. He didn't send the sheriff to me because he was afraid I'd seize the chance to lie and make it worse for him. I'd only be doing what Chad expects, acting as he would if he were in my place.

With that thought I knew exactly what I had to do. One Chad Bascom in this world is enough. I could not—no matter how righteous the words in which I cloaked my motive—remake myself in his image. When the sheriff drove up to the door I was waiting with the logbook in my hand.

He sat in my office and went over it again and again, as if I might, in repeating it, change my story. The logbook lay open on the desk between us.

"You're sure that's the record of Chad's buy?" Crane's index finger moved on to the line below. "Not this one? The later time would fit."

"I'm positive he's the one at ten past ten," I said wearily. "I remember his snapping that $5 bill at me. And the 10:55 entry shows a quart of oil. Chad got nothing but gas."

"That pulls it apart. I checked the television station

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to confirm the time and text of Pastor Meyer's sermon. He talked about blessing the persecuted and went off the air at 9:58. Ruth was alive and talking to her mother at ten o'clock. So your story gives Chad an airtight alibi."

His tone was angry, blaming me for the flaw in his case. "When it comes to credibility he couldn't have a better witness. His woman would protect him, he might have gotten a pal to lie for him. He could even bribe a stranger. But you, Nate—when you testify on Chad's side it has to be the truth."

"Yes," I said, "it's the truth."

"Funny thing," Crane went on. "Chad's been taken off the hook by the testimony of the three people who'd most like to make him pay for what he did to Ruth—her mother, her cousin Kitty, and you."

And me, I added mentally. A sanctimonious fool who couldn't keep his mouth shut.

"Nothing left but to go back to the jail and turn him loose." His lips twisted in a humorless smile. "With apologies yet."

The bell rang and I left him sitting there while I went out to fill another tank. When I came back he was pacing the length of the office with an air of great impatience. I wondered why he hadn't left.

"Go on." He waved me to the desk. "Write up your sale."

I did so and he moved round beside me. "Is that"—he pointed to the desk clock—"your only timepiece?"

"I've a watch upstairs. I don't wear it when I'm working. That clock keeps good time."

"Okay, let me see what you just wrote."

Puzzled, I pushed the log toward him and let him read the last line: "5:20—11.3 gallons high test—$4.55."

"Then it's all right." He let out his breath in a long sigh. "We've got Chad tied up in a neat package."

"I don't understand."

"This is the last Sunday in April, Nate. Daylight Saving Time began this morning, but you didn't turn your clock forward." He thrust his left arm in front of my face, pushed back the sleeve. His watch said 6:20. "Chad was here not at 10:10, but at 11:10—one hour later than you thought."

"Q"

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THE THEFT OF THE CIRCUS POSTER

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Nick Velvet had been home for weeks, in a state of brooding inactivity, when the summons came. It was from a man in Brooklyn whom Nick had once helped, and his voice was raspingly familiar on the phone.

"It's for a friend of mine in Miami," the man told him. "If you can fly down there tonight he'll meet you at the airport."

Nick hesitated only a moment. "I'll be there. What's his name?"

"He'll be using the name of Mason."

"How will I recognize him?"

"He'll recognize you."

Nick went upstairs to the fancy yellow bedroom and began to pack. After a while Gloria came in with two cans of beer. "You're not going away again, Nicky?"

"I have to look over some

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new plant sites in Florida. Should be back by the end of the week."

She leaned against the door frame, her long hair tumbling over the softness of her face. "I was hoping we could go sailing now that the weather's warm."

"We'll go as soon as I get back," he promised. "I won't be long, really. I have to make some money for us, don't I?"

"Sure, Nicky. Send me a postcard, will you? Something pretty, with an orange grove on it."

He kissed her lightly on the lips and went downstairs with his suitcase.

The flight down the Atlantic coast was smooth and uneventful, and the skyline of Miami was much as he remembered it from his last visit during the 1972 political conventions. That time he'd stolen something for the staff of an unsuccessful presidential candidate, and he liked to think his action may have altered the course of the convention.

This trip started out in a much more prosaic manner. He was met at the airport by a beefy-cheeked man in a rumpled summer suit who ushered him into a waiting car. "Mr. Mason is sorry he couldn't meet you in person," the man said.

"Are we going to his home?"

"A hotel room. He conducts all his business in hotel rooms."

"I see."

The man, who said his name was Jimmy, spoke little until they reached their destination, a third-rate hotel north of the city and near the Hialeah race track. "Room 26," Jimmy said. "I'll wait out here for you."

Nick found the door to Room 26 slightly ajar and pushed it open. He was utterly unprepared for the sight that greeted him—a man in garish clown's makeup and wearing an old tuxedo sat in a chair facing the door.

"You're Nick Velvet? Come in, come in!" The voice was obviously disguised.

"Mr. Mason?" Nick asked, stepping forward uncertainly. He could see nothing of the man's face beneath the heavy layers of makeup. The skin was dead-white, with big red lips, red spots on each cheek, and a red rubber ball for a nose.

"Mason is the name I use. You'll forgive the clown makeup, but I find it necessary at times to conceal my appearance and identity. I was told by a friend in Brooklyn that you're an expert thief who specializes in the unusual."

"I steal anything without value—never money or jewels. My fee is $20,000—in cash." Nick's eyes roamed the hotel

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room, searching for some clue to the man's identity. All he saw was a brief case pushed half under the bed. He thought the initials on it were JKS.

"Could you steal a circus poster?" the clown asked.

"Certainly."

"It's part of a collection owned by a retired old clown named Herbie Benson. He lives near Miami. I'll give you the address."

"Why is it worth so much to you? Is the poster a collector's item?"

"Be curious on someone else's time, Velvet." The harsh words seemed somehow incongruous with the grinning clown's face. "Here's a down payment, along with Herbie Benson's address and a description of the poster I want. How long will it take you?"

"Seems fairly simple," Nick replied. "This is Monday. Let's say Thursday night, or sooner. I'll come here with the poster."

"Fine."

Nick shook the man's gloved hand and left the room. Jimmy, the driver, was lounging by his car, and Nick gave him the address of a moderately priced hotel on Biscayne Bay. Heading downtown, he opened the envelope and counted ten hundred-dollar bills inside. Then he put Benson's address in his wallet and read over the description of the circus poster he'd been hired to steal:

Great National Circus Poster of the 1916 season, with five acrobats at top, rhinoceros and clowns at bottom.

Nick put it back in the envelope with the money. At the hotel entrance he thanked Jimmy for the ride and checked into a room overlooking the bay. There were hotel postcards in the drawer, and he mailed one to Gloria.

The town of Snake Creek was north of Miami, along a canal that ran inland from North Miami Beach to the edge of the Everglades. It was a rural area, barely touched by the spreading suburbs of the city proper, and as Nick drove his rented car down the main street he might have been in any part of the South, far removed from the luxury hotels of Miami Beach.

Herbie Benson seemed much like the other retired residents of Snake Creek, and at first glance there seemed nothing about his sagging face and dull eyes to suggest a former circus clown. He lived in a small white house with peeling paint and steps worn to the bare wood by the passage of feet. He was a little man, aging like his house, and his weak eyes focused on Nick with difficulty.

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"Do I know you?" he asked, standing at the front door behind the protection of the screen, a few strands of thin white hair drifting over his forehead.

"My name is Nicholas. I understand you were once a circus clown."

The old eyes sparkled for an instant behind their thick glasses. "That was long ago. Nobody's interested in old clowns any more."

"I'm interested," Nick said. "May I come in?"

"You're not going to rob me, are you? Person can't be too careful these days."

Nick chuckled. "Do I look like a thief?"

The man studied him. "No, I guess not." He unlatched the screen door. "Come on in."

The little house was surprisingly cool after the warmth of the street. Furnished in a worn drabness that seemed to reflect the years of Herbie Benson's life, it was still a place for pleasant relaxing.

Nick suddenly realized they were not alone in the house. There was a noise from the kitchen and a young tawny-haired woman appeared carrying a glass of fruit juice. "This is my granddaughter, Judy," the old man said, wiping his old-fashioned spectacles with a soiled handkerchief.

Nick nodded and introduced himself. "Nicholas is my name. I have an interest in circus lore, mainly as a hobby. I couldn't pass through town without stopping to see Mr. Benson."

"He lives here alone," she answered bluntly. "He shouldn't be opening his door to strangers." He guessed her age at about 23, and she wore the cool unsmiling expression one saw on so many other young faces these days.

"Now, Judy," the old man started to protest.

"It's true, Grandpa! What do you know about this man? If I weren't here he could hit you over the head and steal everything in sight!"

"He looks honest, Judy."

"I can assure you—" Nick began, but she waved him into silence. Her long tawny hair swirled as she turned and disappeared into the kitchen.

"Don't mind her," Herbie Benson said. "She just grows tired of all the circus talk sometimes."

Nick sat down, feeling more welcome. "This is a nice little town you have."

"I like it. Close to Miami, and not too far from Winter Haven and Sarasota, where a lot of circus people spend the winter."

"You still see your old circus friends?"

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"I see the ones that are left. I joined the circus back during the First World War, when I shoulda been in school." His old eyes clouded for an instant. "Most of the people I knew are dead now."

"You were a clown that long ago?"

"No, no, not at first. Believe it or not, Mr. Nicholas, my first circus job was carrying water for the elephants, just like in all the old stories. But I was a clown before I was twenty, and I stayed a clown for nearly forty years, till my first heart attack. I was there. I saw it all. I started with the Great National Circus in their final years, and then switched to Barnum and Bailey."

Judy Benson came back carrying another glass of fruit juice. "This is for you," she told Nick. Then she sat down, still unsmiling.

"Thank you. Your grandfather was just telling me about his early circus days."

She eyed Nick in silence and Herbie Benson continued, "I think those early days with Great National were the best of all. They had a really big spread, with acrobats and lions and even a Wild West show. Come in here, I'll show you some of their posters."

"Grandpa," Judy cautioned, but the old man was already on his feet, leading Nick into the next room.

It had been a dining room at one time, but when Nick passed through the swinging door he saw that it was now given over completely to the memories and trophies of a lifetime. There were garish circus posters and framed programs dating back more than 50 years, along with dozens of photographs of a sad-faced clown with groups of children or greeting some celebrity or simply alone in a circus ring. A cluster of limp balloons bearing the words *Herbie the Clown* hung over a picture of two clowns inscribed *Herbie and Willie.*

But it was one of the circus posters that interested Nick. Yellowed with age and curling at the edges, there could be no doubt this was the poster he'd been hired to steal. Five stiff-bodied acrobats at the top flew through the air with awkward grace, with the one in the foreground sporting a Teddy Roosevelt mustache that made him seem the twin of the one high on a trapeze in the background. A slim banner beneath them read: *The Flying Fantini Brothers.*

In the lower portion of the poster a faded purple rhinoceros glowered out from a swampy setting of trees and ferns. "I never saw a purple

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rhino," Nick said, recalling the famous verse by Gelett Burgess about a purple cow.

"These posters are real Americana," the old man told him. "I've been offered a thousand dollars for my whole collection intact, but of course I would never sell."

"How much would an individual poster be worth?"

"Alone? Not much—next to nothing, unless you came across some kind of a crank collector. They reprint these things too much nowadays. Who'd want to pay good money for an original when he could buy a reproduction at the local bookstore for a dollar or two?"

"You've got something there," Nick admitted. He pointed to the 1916 poster. "This must have been early in your career."

"The year before I joined Great National," he answered with a trace of pride.

"You must have known a lot of clowns in your day."

"All the big ones. Willie was a special friend."

"Ever know one named Mason?" If a man wore clown makeup, it seemed logical to Nick that he might be a former clown.

"What circus was he with?"

"I don't know. I could have the name wrong." His eyes strayed back to the purple rhino and the clowns and the five acrobats. "You know, there's something peculiar about that poster, but I don't know what."

"They're funny-looking by today's art standards, I guess, but I love every one of them."

They chatted a while longer and then Nick rose to leave. Stealing the poster seemed so simple that he wondered why the mysterious Mr. Mason hadn't simply hired the first crook he could find and pay him $50 to do the job. Herbie walked him to the porch and they shook hands. "You've brightened my day," the former clown said. "I always like to talk circus. Come back sometime and I'll put on my clown makeup for you."

"I'll do that," Nick said, and waved goodbye.

He was just starting the car when Judy Benson came running out of the house. "Mr. Nicholas, could you give me a ride down to the store? I have to do some shopping for my grandfather."

"Sure. Climb in."

"Nice car you have."

Nick nodded.

"You don't talk like a southerner. Are you from this area?"

He pulled slowly away from the curb, aware that her sudden friendliness was in sharp con-

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trast to her earlier coolness. "No, I'm from up north. Just driving through."

"But this is a rented car, rented here in Florida. You're not just driving through at all." Her voice was suddenly accusing.

"I happen to live in New York and I don't own a car. I flew down here and rented this one."

She didn't reply immediately but stared straight ahead. Finally she said, "My grandfather is a sick old man, Mr. Nicholas. His heart is very bad. If anyone were to swindle him or steal his possessions, the shock would kill him."

"Why do you tell me this?"

"Because another man came to see him only a week ago. He wanted to buy one of my grandfather's posters, and then he just tried to steal it. Luckily I arrived in time and threatened to call the police unless the man left. After that I made Grandpa promise never to let anyone in the house unless I was there."

"And you think I'm connected with this other man? What's his name?"

"I don't know. He had fat cheeks and wore a rumpled suit."

Nick recognized the description of Mason's driver, Jimmy. So the man in the clown makeup had made a previous attempt to get the poster. Still, why had he felt it necessary to hire Nick?

"I don't know the man," Nick said.

"All right, Mr. Nicholas. I hope you're telling the truth, because there's an unpleasant surprise waiting for the next person who tries to rob my grandfather."

He ignored the threat in her words and said, "Tell me one thing. Why was this man so anxious to buy or steal the poster, when your grandfather is so sure it's valueless?"

She turned her deep brown eyes toward him. "I haven't the least idea, Mr. Nicholas."

Nick knew he could do nothing further that day, so he returned to his Miami hotel and spent the early evening on the beach, watching the yachts cruising over the blue waters of Biscayne Bay. At sunset he went in for a swim, and when he returned to the damp sand he found Jimmy, the man in the rumpled suit, awaiting him.

"So you been to see old Herbie?"

"Yes," Nick said warily.

Jimmy smiled a lopsided sort of smile. "Mason thought you'd be better than me. He thought you could get the poster after I failed. But he was wrong, wasn't he?"

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"I don't know. I haven't tried yet."

The smile broadened. "He said you were pretty good. A unique thief-detective, he called you."

"Anyone could climb through his window and steal that poster."

"Yeah? You think so? You met the granddaughter yet?"

"I've met her."

"She tell you what she does for a living?"

"I didn't ask."

"She's with the circus, same as her grandfather used to be."

"As a clown?" Nick asked, unbelieving.

Jimmy shook his head. "She has a sideshow act with a little circus that tours around Florida. She's a snake charmer."

"A snake—"

"That's right, wise guy. Every night she puts her grandfather to bed and lets loose a sackful of rattlesnakes in that house. Still think you can just climb through the window and steal that poster?"

Nick Velvet drove to the hotel where he'd met Mason the previous evening. There were some things to be straightened out, among them his fee. For wrestling rattlesnakes Nick charged more.

As he went down the hall toward Mason's room he saw a tall graying man with his hand on the knob. The man turned suddenly as Nick approached and asked, "Are you looking for Mr. Mason, too?"

"I am."

"He's not here. I've been knocking and no one answers."

Nick tried the door. It was locked. "You a friend of his?"

"I'm a lawyer." The man flipped a card from his inside pocket and Nick read:

Haskin Kimbell
Jeans, Kimbell & Sachs
Miami, Florida

"Pleased to meet you. My name is Nicholas."

"Are you in Mr. Mason's employ?"

"In a way, yes."

The lawyer pursed his lips, hesitating. "Would you be the man he hired to get the circus poster?"

"Yes," Nick admitted. "But I have to speak to him about our arrangement. A complication has come up."

The tall lawyer glanced around. "Let's go somewhere and talk. The downstairs bar, perhaps."

The bar had a scattering of late-evening drinkers, but Nick and the lawyer easily found a booth where they could not be overheard. When the drinks arrived, Haskin Kimbell dropped

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the small talk and said, "Let's get down to business, Mr. Nicholas."

"What sort of business?"

"Do you have the poster?"

"I told you, there's a complication."

"It's urgent that we obtain it."

"We?"

Haskin Kimbell sighed. "I represent the sole surviving heir to the Fantini oil fortune."

"Fantini?" Nick remembered the name on the poster—*The Flying Fantini Brothers.*

"They were acrobats in their younger days, traveling with the circus. But after one of them was crippled in a fall they left the circus and went into the oil business, drilling wildcat wells. It was in the early nineteen-twenties, a good time for wildcatters. They struck it rich and over the years built up a considerable fortune. The last of the brothers—so everyone thought at the time—died a year ago at the age of seventy-three. He left no family, no heirs, and an estate estimated at ten million dollars."

"Is there a will?"

"There is, but it was drawn a decade earlier while his brothers were still alive. It left his entire estate to the brothers or brother who survived him. If none survived, the estate went to various charities."

"And you say no brother survived?"

The lawyer sipped his drink. "So it was believed at the time. Now a man has appeared who claims to be the last surviving brother. His name is Anthony Fantini, and he is my client."

"He must have offered you some proof."

"Proof of events sixty or seventy years ago can be hard to produce. The brothers were born in Italy and came here in the early years of this century. The birth records in their Italian village were destroyed during World War Two, and no one alive today remembers the family. Unfortunately, the records of the Great National circus have also been lost over the years. In simple truth we don't know with certainty just how many Fantini brothers there were. Four can be accounted for, but my client claims he is the fifth brother. If that is true he is entitled to the estate."

"He must have something to support his claim."

"A great deal. He knows everything about the family's early life. The one thing we're lacking is convincing evidence there were five Flying Fantini Brothers instead of four."

"The circus poster!"

"Exactly. The number of Ringling Brothers, for example, can easily be certified as five

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because a group portrait of them appeared on early Ringling posters. Likewise, that Great National poster can prove there were five Fantini brothers. Shortly after I took the surviving Fantini's case, this man named Mason approached me with an offer. He claimed to know of this old circus poster which would prove there were five Fantinis. He offered to deliver it for what might be called a finder's fee."

"How big a fee?"

"Six figures. Recently he told me he'd hired you to get the poster. I came here tonight to see if he had it yet."

"My agreement is for delivery by Thursday or before."

"Then you can get it? You know where it is?"

"I've seen it," Nick admitted. "But tell me about Mason. What does he look like?"

The lawyer seemed puzzled. "Haven't you met him?"

"Not in the flesh."

"He looks fairly ordinary. Middle-aged, gray hair. Nothing unusual."

Nick decided not to mention the clown makeup. "All right. I'll have the poster by Thursday morning. You can meet me in Mason's hotel room if you wish."

"Fine."

"One last thing. You mentioned a fall that crippled one of the Fantinis. Surely there must be newspaper accounts of it. Even if the circus records are lost, the papers would tell you if there were four or five brothers."

Kimbell shook his head. "I've been over all that—everything. There were some brief newspaper accounts, but none mentioned the number of brothers. I even checked back issues of trade papers like *Variety* and *Billboard*, but they only added to the confusion. It seems when the brothers first started out, there were only three because the others were still too young. I've found mention of three Fantinis and four Fantinis, but nothing about my client—the fifth and youngest of them. He was only with Great National that one season, so that poster is the only proof in existence."

"There were only boys in the family? No surviving sisters?"

"All boys. Born a year or two apart just before the turn of the century. My client was seventeen when he joined the act, and of course he's well into his seventies now."

"So you really need the poster."

"I really need it."

"I'll get it," Nick promised.

He spent most of the next

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day in his hotel room experimenting with a variety of grease paints and makeup kits. Finally, around dinnertime, he gazed into the mirror and was satisfied. He washed off the makeup and ate a quick dinner alone. Then, as the long evening shadows began to fall across the bay, he put the materials he'd need in a paper bag and carried them down to his rented car. Less than an hour later he was back in Snake Creek.

Herbie Benson's house was dark except for a single light in an upstairs bedroom. Nick parked down the street and worked quickly to apply his makeup. It was more difficult in the car than it had been in his hotel room, but after a half-hour's work he was satisfied. As a final touch he stuck on the round rubber nose and then walked quickly down the street to the house.

He rang the doorbell twice before Herbie appeared at an upstairs window. "I can't come down!" he shouted. "Go away, whoever you are!"

Nick stepped into the glow from a street light. "Herbie! Don't you remember me?"

"Who is it?"

"Herbie, I used to work with you years ago. Don't you remember Willie?"

"Willie? Is that you, Willie?"

Nick had remembered the clown on the photograph with Herbie and had tried to duplicate his makeup. With Herbie's age and poor eyesight in Nick's favor, he thought he could bring it off. "Come down and open the door, Herbie. I have to talk to you."

"I can't come down. She's turned the snakes loose."

"Then I'll come up."

Nick boosted himself onto the porch railing and from there to the drainpipe and the porch roof. In a few moments he was at the old man's window. Herbie squinted, reached for his thick glasses and put them on. "You look different. You sure you're Willie?"

"Who else would come to see you with a clown outfit on?" Nick climbed quickly through the window. "Remember the old days? The good times we had?"

"You're not Willie." The voice was firm. "You're too young."

"I'm Willie's son. He sent me to you. He needs something from you, Herbie, and he needs it pretty bad."

"What's that?"

"One of your circus posters, Herbie."

The old man let out his breath. "I couldn't! That's what the snakes are for! She said that guy tried to steal my collection. She leaves the snakes every

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night and comes back to pick them up in the morning."

"But you could get through the snakes, couldn't you, Herbie?"

"Oh, sure. But Judy would be awfully upset."

"Even if you did it for an old friend?"

"Well . . ." He hesitated, and Nick saw him eye the clown makeup with something like nostalgia. "You did a nice job of putting that on, but the mouth's too crooked."

"Think you could fix it?"

"Sure. I'll show you how. Us clowns gotta stick together."

He sat Nick down on a straight-backed chair and got out a couple of jars of grease paint. After a few minutes of work he was satisfied. "There now, that's lots better! You look like a real clown now."

"About the poster—"

"Sure, your dad can have it—I got plenty of them. Which one does Willie want?"

"The Great National, from 1916."

"Yeah. That's the one the other fellow wanted, too. Kind of a popular poster, isn't it? Come on down with me."

"But the snakes—"

"They won't hurt you."

Nick followed him gingerly down the stairs, watching and listening. As he crossed the dark living room behind the old man he heard a warning rattle and his hand went for the little pistol under his arm.

"I said not to worry," Herbie insisted. "They're carnival snakes. The poison sacs have been removed. Think she's dumb enough to work with the real thing?"

Nick relaxed, realizing it was true. "They certainly do their job, keeping prowlers away." By the glow of the street light he saw a diamondback rattler slowly uncoil and slither away under a table.

Old Herbie removed the 1916 Great National poster from the wall and started to roll it up. "Say hello to your dad for me."

"Can I pay you for it?"

"It's not worth anything alone. Take it—a gift from a fellow clown. It was your father who helped me put together most of this collection."

"Did you know these fellows—the Fantini brothers?"

"No, they left the circus just about the time I joined."

"But you probably heard some talk about them. Wasn't one of them crippled in a fall?"

"Yeah, I remember."

Staring at the poster, Nick asked Herbie one more question—but he was already sure what the answer would be.

In the morning he dressed

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quickly and retrieved the poster from its hiding place in the closet. He was just opening the door of his room when Judy Benson stepped off the elevator.

"Not so fast, Mr. Nicholas. Back inside!"

He was about to ignore her command when he saw the .22 automatic come out of her purse. "What is this?"

"Back inside," she repeated.

"How did you find me?"

"I checked the license of your rented car and found it was assigned to the rental agency at this hotel. Then I just asked at the desk for Mr. Nicholas' room."

"What do you want? And what's the gun for?"

"I came for the poster you stole from my grandfather."

"He gave it to me. Didn't he tell you?"

"You tricked him, claiming to be the son of an old circus friend. He's an old man, Mr. Nicholas, and very gullible. Someone came to him in clown makeup, so he believed what he was told. But now you're dealing with me, and I have a gun."

"Are you really a snake charmer?" Nick asked. "You don't look like one."

"I've been around carnivals all my life, and I know a con man when I see one. My snakes may have failed to stop you, but I won't!" She raised the gun in a threatening gesture.

"All right. But you should know what you're getting into."

"Meaning?"

"This poster is part of a swindle to obtain a ten-million-dollar inheritance. Let me show you." He started to unroll the poster.

"No tricks now!"

"No tricks." He held up the poster for her to see. "Notice the illustration of the acrobats. *The Flying Fantini Brothers.* There are five of them, and this poster will be the main item of proof to establish one Anthony Fantini as the rightful claimant to the Fantini oil fortune. But do you notice anything peculiar about these acrobats?"

Before she could answer there was a knock on the door. Judy Benson slipped the gun into her oversized purse as Nick opened the door a crack. The door was shoved back into his face as the beefy-cheeked Jimmy forced his way in. He wore the same rumpled suit, but now he carried a heavy automatic in his hand. The lawyer Haskin Kimbell was right behind him.

"Come in," Nick said, hiding his surprise and rubbing his cheek where the door had hit him. "It's good to see you both

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again, and especially to see that you've decided to skip the clown makeup this time, Mr. Kimbell."

"We came for the poster," Kimbell said. "When Jimmy saw the girl come up here, he thought you were double-crossing us."

"Not a chance. The poster is all yours, as soon as I collect the rest of my fee." He was careful not to look at Judy Benson.

"All right," Kimbell agreed, but the gun was steady in Jimmy's beefy hand. Then, almost as an afterthought, the lawyer asked, "How'd you know I was Mason?"

"When I went to his hotel room Tuesday night I caught you as you were leaving. You pretended to be knocking on the door, looking for Mason yourself, but you didn't fool me. Mason had a brief case in his room with the initials JKS on it. They weren't the initials of a person but of your law firm—Jeans, Kimbell and Sachs. But your clown makeup did give me the idea of how to steal the poster from Herbie, so I have to thank you for that."

"I'm taking back that poster," Judy Benson said suddenly, her hand reappearing with the gun. "You're all a bunch of crooks!"

Jimmy swung around quickly and hit her arm, sending her pistol flying across the room. The familiar smile was on his face as he pushed her onto the bed. "Stay there or you'll get hurt."

Haskin Kimbell looked distressed. "Give me the poster, Velvet."

"I was about to show Miss Benson something peculiar about it," Nick said. He didn't like to see girls pushed around, and just then he wasn't feeling too kindly toward Kimbell and his goon. "In fact, there's been something peculiar about this whole business."

"What's that?" the lawyer asked.

"Three questions: Why did you go to the trouble of creating a mythical middleman in clown makeup rather than simply hire me yourself to get the poster? Why hire it stolen in the first place when you could have asked Herbie Benson to lend it to you for the court hearing? And finally, why not simply have Herbie testify as to the number of Fantini brothers?"

"All right, why?"

"Because this poster is deceiving. Because there never was a fifth Fantini. Because your claimant to the fortune is an impostor, carefully coached by you, Kimbell. I asked Herbie

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last night how many brothers there were and he told me four—as I knew he would. The records you found listed three or four brothers—but never five. Only this poster showed five brothers, and that's why you couldn't have Herbie in court where someone could ask him about it. You had to steal the poster, and you created Mason to do it so that if the truth came out you'd be in the clear."

"You mean the poster is a fake?" Judy asked from the bed.

"No, it's real enough. But in the style of many such posters it duplicated performers to give the impression of a great number. Notice the Teddy Roosevelt mustache on this man in the foreground and the man up here. The two men look alike, yet there were no Fantini twins—you told me yourself they were born one or two years apart, Kimbell. These two look alike because they're the same man, shown in two different poses, once alone and once with his brothers."

"Could he prove the existence of a fifth brother merely with this poster as evidence?" Judy asked.

"Maybe, maybe not. But for ten million dollars it was worth a try. Right, Kimbell?"

"It's still worth a try," the lawyer said. "But now we have to get rid of you two. Jimmy—"

"There's another gun in my purse," Judy shouted to Nick.

At first her words baffled him. The oversized purse was on the floor almost at Jimmy's feet. There was no way Nick could reach it first.

"Hold it!" Jimmy said, leveling his gun at Nick. He kicked over the purse, spilling its contents across the floor, and bent to inspect a drawstring pouch. "It's a snake!" he yelled, his voice close to a high-pitched scream.

That was when Nick moved.

Later, when he was alone with Judy, Nick said, "You really are a snake charmer."

"That was just a little ground snake, but it scared him enough for you to get hold of his gun."

"*And* the rest of my fee from Kimbell." He handed her the poster. "You can take this back to your grandfather now. I think Kimbell's decided to forget all about his scheme."

"What kind of thief does that make you, returning the loot?"

"A good thief," he said. "Don't you think I should get a reward?"

"I think so," she agreed with a grin. "Have you ever been kissed by a snake charmer?"

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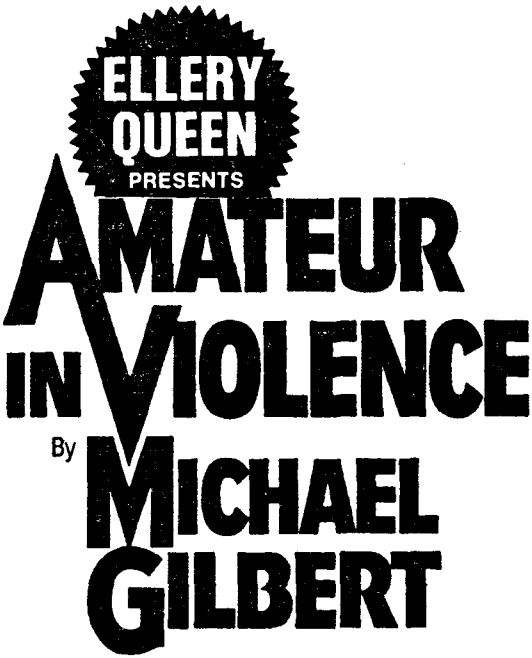

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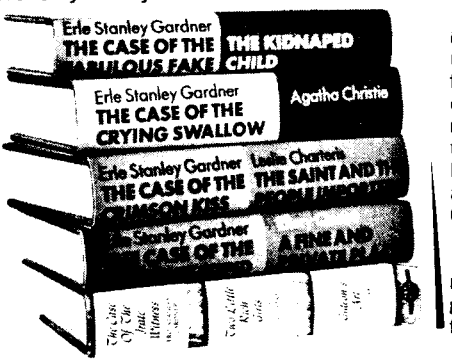

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